

The Cinemas of Portsmouth – Past and Present

From the 1920s until the 1950s cinema going was the predominant leisure activity of a large proportion of British people. Both sexes went to the cinema, all age groups, but a lack of elderly patrons. All classes went to the picture palaces, in particular the working class. As the more affluent folk would dance their cares away at nightclubs while knocking back champagne. The working class would rather queue with their sixpence and ninepence for the escapism that was, the picture house.

The seats were usually more comfortable than those at home and the cinemas even had wall-to-wall carpeting, when at home the cinemagoers had to make do with cold lino or even bare boards under their feet. The picture houses were more commonly known as bughutches and fleapits due to the audience getting sprayed above their heads with disinfectant during the interval. This smell apparently lingered on your clothes for days afterwards. There was no hiding from your mother where you had spent your Saturday night!

Cinema had a place in people's lives that since 1950s television has replaced. The films of those years are now shown on television to an audience whose grandparents and parents would have seen the same films at the cinema many years ago when they were first released! (Aldgate, 2002, p.1 – 16).

'The audience sat spellbound, their faces illuminated by the glow of light being emitted from the great screen before them, they were witnessing the

wonders of moving pictures.’ (Barker, 1981, p.2) This is how cinemas were in the 20s and 30s. Times were depressing, so movie-makers attempted to bring people out of their doldrums. They produced happy-go-lucky musicals with little or no story, the good guy always got the girl and the patron went home happy!

Although, sadly, after seeing the stars of the film enjoying a rich and luxurious life, the patron would return to his or her ‘rented two-up, two-down, straight in off the pavement abode, swig a mug of ‘Epps’ cocoa, crawl into a bug-infested bed and snooze off into slumber no doubt dreaming that tomorrow he may find a job!’ (Barker, 1981, p.2)

Even the picture houses were part of the fantasyland escapism. With names like Savoy, Regent, Ritz, Palace, Majestic, Ambassador, Apollo, Princes et al the picture houses were designed as places of amusement and not only to show escapist moving pictures. The foyer would often have a marble gold fishpond surrounded by pillars and potted palms.

Forgetting all your troubles was easy in this environment that was so far from that of your own household atmosphere. The auditorium had ceilings studded with twinkling lights giving the impression that you could be watching the films in the open by starlight.

The cinema staff were also part of the show-biz spirit, dressed in magnificent uniforms, ready to usher the filmgoers to their seats or sell ice creams during the interval. Most of them wanted to help as much as possible. A grey haired old lady usherette even went so far as to 'whisper a quick run through of what had happened so far in the plot' (Barker, 1981, p.3) if you came in after the film had started!

There was always great competition between the various cinemas in Portsmouth. In their individual advertising they 'used to adopt slogans to push the merits of going into their establishment' (Barker, 1981, p.4). Billboard slogans included 'Always Cosy and Warm', 'The Family House' and 'If it's a good picture, it's coming here!'

Most cinemas boasted their own orchestra in the old days, although musicians tended to move around from cinema to cinema. There was a lot of difference between the actual sizes of the said 'orchestra'. It could be a 10-piece ensemble or just be a soul pianist! The cinema organ later replaced the orchestra.

The Shaftsbury in Kingston Road was one of the first picture houses in the Portsmouth area to have an organ on the premises. The organ used was the church type. It was very suitable for any mood music needed for powerful almost regal scenes but was not as versatile as the later models.

The first purpose built cinema organ was placed at the Regent Cinema in North End - that later became the Gaumont. This organ was installed in 1928 at a time when the 'talkies' came about (sound on film). This was a very important time in film history. Due to the musical accompaniment not being necessary any longer the organ then became useful to add music between films. The first 'talking' film, *'The Singing Fool'*, was screened on the 28th January 1929 at the Plaza cinema in Southsea.

Picture houses came into their own during the war time. They bought a burst of patriotism that has yet to be matched since, especially from the newsreels. Watching captured German or Italian prisoners of war sullenly marching with their hands above their heads would produce spontaneous applause from the cinema audience! People went to the cinema to escape from the falling bombs outside.

Then the years 1940 to 1941 came. All the following were bombed by the Germans between these dates. Princes - 24th August 1940, Arcade, Hippodrome, Scala, Queens and the Rialto were all bombed on the 10th January 1941. All these cinemas had to be demolished after the devastating damage caused (Gauntlett, interview on 5th May 2003).

The so-called 'Grandfather of Films' actually came from Portsmouth. Alfred West began his working career in the family photographic business. Branches

of this business, that Alfred's father began, could be found in Gosport and later Palmerston Road in Southsea. One of Alfred's technical innovations in the photographic world was the instantaneous shutter that enabled objects to be photographed in motion. He was the first to capture a sailing boat in full sail in the 1880s. *'Our Navy'* was his most notable film and a very natural subject area for the area in which he lived. This film was first shown at the Portland Hall in Southsea in 1898. Portland Hall was in Kent Road within Southsea and was used mainly for public meetings and theatrical presentations.

The film had a captive audience locally and around the country. It was also probably the first Royal Command Film Performance as Queen Victoria requested that it was shown at Osborne House. West continued to be concerned with the world of film until 1914 when he returned from Australia, moved to the Isle of Wight and became famous all over again but not for his film talent, but for cultivating violets! After his wife died, he moved back to the mainland where he lived in a Southsea nursing home till he died in 1937 at the grand age of 80.

Cinema was an important and integral part of life. So much so that it caused much cinematographic parliamentary debate. Film Propaganda organisations were set up, particularly the Conservative Party.

The 1936 Moyne Committee Report into the working of the Cinematography Films Act succinctly summarized the prevalent view:

The cinematography film is today one of the most widely used means for the amusement of the public at large. It is also undoubtedly a most important factor in the education of all classes of the community, in the spread of national culture and in presenting national ideas and customs to the world. Its potentialities moreover in shaping the idea of the very large numbers to whom it appeals are almost unlimited. The propaganda value of the film cannot be overemphasised.

Cinematography Act 1927: Report of a Committee appointed by the board of Trade.

In 1947 a dramatic intervention by the Government in the affairs of British film exhibition occurred. The Ad-Valorem Tax.

Ad-Valorem. 1711 (L). 'In proportion to the value'; a phrase applied to a mode of levying customers duties upon goods when these are taxed at rates proportionate to their estimated value e.g. silk goods paid an ad-valorem duty of 30 per cent. (1925).

- *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary, Volume 1, reprinted 1990.*

There was a dollar shortage after the Second World War that hit Britain hard. The Labour Government of the time quickly passed a new Finance Act. This was an ad-valorem tax on all Hollywood films. This meant that the British Exchequer could take 75 per cent of the movies estimated earnings in Britain. This tax began on the 7th August 1947, and the very next day, Hollywood

responded by putting an embargo on all its films, they would not send any more of their films over to Britain until the tax was lifted.

Hollywood had 125 films in Britain when the American embargo began. These films had not been shown to the public. Only sixty of these films were classified as top features. There was nowhere near enough films to keep the likes of the Odeon, Gaumont and ABC screens ticking over.

To compensate for the lack of footage available to keep the cinemas open, short term 'fillers' were produced. These came in the form of single features, reissues, promoting B movies to A features. In the larger cinemas that had stage facilities, they reintroduced pantomimes during the Christmas and New Year periods.

The nation was still in a content state of patriotism and victory and the reissuing of some of the propaganda films made during the war delighted audiences again. Going to the cinema was still very much a way of life for many and the picture house experience was still enjoyed no matter what was shown on the screen, even if they had seen it before.

March 1948 saw a new President of the Board of Trade, Harold Wilson, whom negotiated a truce. American companies were able to remit back to the United States no more than \$17 million of their British profits. They were also

allowed to invest their dollar residue into film production, leisure and hotel industries. The icing on the cake for the Americans was that for every dollar earned by a British film at the US box office and extra dollar could be taken out the country.

In May 1948 the tax was withdrawn and a flood of first class American movies reached Britain. This saw a time in British Cinema history where many independents were given a new lease of life as they were now finding places to screen their work. The picture houses were on a high in 1948. The advertising of films was gone at in a big way.

Large display adverts were placed in the national and provincial press, numerous throwaways (flyers) were printed, personal letters to the patrons were sent and front of house displays were arranged along with press screenings and on some occasions a personal appearance of a star, much like the modern day opening premiers, but done locally in most towns that had a cinema (Gauntlett, Spring 2003, article in the 98th edition of The Veteran entitled 'The Ad-Valorem Tax').

The fate of the early Portsmouth cinemas, that have not been demolished, mostly holds bingo to blame! Nine cinemas were demolished in the 60s and 70s. The Ambassador / Odeon in Cosham is now a bingo hall as well as the Shaftsbury. The Majestic closed its doors as a cinema in 1973 and is now a

snooker club. The Plaza is now a mosque and the Gaiety in Southsea a supermarket. The Palace closed in the 80s and is now a nightclub.

During my research into Portsmouth cinemas I found The Victoria Hall to be the most interesting.

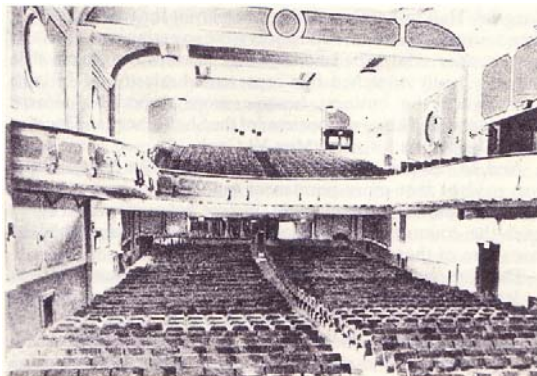
14th August 1909. Victoria Hall, Portsmouth. A lady who happened to be glancing up to the projection box to her horror saw flames leaping from the equipment. She panicked, jumped to her feet and gave an almighty shout of 'FIRE!' Hundreds of children rushed for the exit doors. There was bedlam as the anxious hundreds led from the building. Cinema staff tried to reassure that the situation was under control but to no avail. An attendant from the gallery tried to reassure the two hundred filmgoers that they would come to no harm if they did not panic. While Mr. Ellis tried to hold the crowd back by leaning on the guardrail that was giving way with the weight of all the bodies he was struck by a bottle by a young hooligan. Mr. Ellis was knocked to the floor and the rail gave way causing many children to fall over the balcony edge.

The bodies' fell to the stalls was the orchestra continued to play! The fire was not that bad and although the gallery was closed, the evening performance still carried on as normal! Many children were injured that afternoon, one eleven year old boy would never go to the cinema again as he was crushed to death by the stampede (Barker, 1981, p.2).

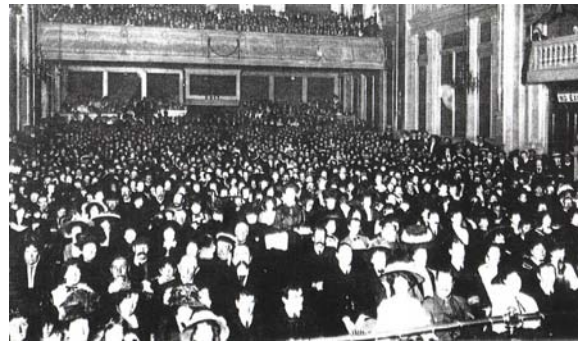
Victoria Hall had been a skating rink, ballroom, theatre and an occasional animated picture house, Edisons in 1901, before it became a regular cinema in 1908. The first moving pictures shown here were screened as early as 1896.

They were more of the novelty type, but the sensation of films that moved was sufficient to attract good-sized audiences for the first month.

The following month brought much-improved cinematic offerings. Billed as 'Paul's original and only teatrography straight from the Alhambra Theatre, London.' The public flocked to the five daily performances. For their 6d (two-and-a-half-pence) entrance fee, they saw 'Princess Maud's Wedding', 'Pictures of Spanish Life' and the 'Prince of Wales' horse winning the Derby'. This took place only eight months after the first ever showing of moving image in Paris by the Lumiere Cinematographe.



Interior – Victoria Hall - empty



Interior – Victoria Hall - full

The 1990 films were shown on a more regular basis when an entrepreneur named Arthur Andrews for £60 a week rented the Victoria Hall. The first program took place on the 26th March 1900 when the local movie pioneer Alfred West showed his masterpiece 'Our Navy'. Of course, it was a silent film but an old man of the sea, Harry Coveney, gave a running commentary.

While under the proprietorship of Andrews', the hall suffered two fires. One in 1909 and the other in 1911. Both incidents served to introduce improved fire protection, not only to Victoria Hall but also at the public halls in Portsmouth. The first talkie film was shown here on the 15th of July 1929.

'You get the best of both mediums at the Victoria Hall. A full-length talkie, and a full-length silent film in one programme. All silent films accompanied by the full Victoria Hall orchestra.'

1937 saw the take over by ABC. In December 1939 it became the Victoria Cinema after being the Victoria Hall regular cinema for forty-seven years. The newly named Victoria cinema had 1,247 seats. The last film 'Expresso Bongo' was shown in 1960. The cinema no longer exists as the building was demolished.

The Victoria Hall was located on Commercial Road. On Commercial Road alone, in an eight-year period, there were eight picture houses, hence this roads nickname 'Portsmouth's cinema street'. Victoria Hall was the first regular cinema in Portsmouth and astonishingly it survived until 1960!

Now a days cinema in Britain enjoy almost four million (3.46 million) cinemagoers filling their seats a week. There are some 3,400 screens in the United Kingdom that spread over 777 cinemas. In March 2003 there were 10.4

million cinema admissions recorded at an average of 2.36 million per week.

The top five films in March 2003 were: **1** *Maid in Manhattan* that made £7 million at the box office, **2** *The Ring* with £5 million, **3** *Chicago* with 2.8 million, **4** *Just Married* with £2.1 million and **5** *The Recruit* with £1.3 million.

The graphs on the following pages show the percentage of cinemagoers to art films, Bollywood, Kids movies and general cinema audience statistics. Here we can see the figures for age, class and gender within these four types of cinema.

(Please see attached graphs on the following four pages. The project continues after these.)

In summary therefore, we can conclude that the mostly likely type of cinemagoer to art films is an over 35 year old male belonging to the ABC1 socio-economic group. The least likely type of person to go to art films would be a female, aged 25 to 34 belonging to the C2DE socio-economic group. Admissions to kids films, as expected, are mostly aged 4 to 24, belonging to the ABC1 socio-economic group, however there is no bias as to the gender.

The type of person least likely to go to see kids movies is a male or female aged 25 to 34 belonging to the C2DE socio-economic group. Bollywood cinema is most attended by males aged 7 to 24 from the ABC1 socio-economic group. The least likely type of person to go see a Bollywood film would be a female aged over 35 belonging to the C2DE socio-economic group. Cinemagoers in general are mostly likely to be male aged 15 to 24 and belonging to the ABC1 socio-economic group. The least likely type of person to go to the cinema is a female aged 25 to 34 belonging to the C2DE socio-economic group.

There are fairly obvious reasons for these trends. Looking at art film attendance it would seem sensible that the most likely class to see this type of film would be of the ABC1 class due to the fact that the majority of cinemas that show art films are located within larger cities. The city centres of the likes of London, Manchester and Bristol would be the most affluent members

of society. Art films also tend to attract a more intellectual audience, whom are mostly within the ABC1 class group.

Kids films are, by their very nature, predominately attended by younger people. There is no bias as to the gender of kids movie audiences, perhaps due to the 2.4 children, one male, one female child to every set of parents rule of thumb. Throughout the statistics it is always the case that socio-economic groups ABC1 are more likely to go to the cinema rather than C2DE groups. This is perhaps due to the lack of disposable income within the C2DE socio-economic groups.

Bollywood films are an interesting area. The reason for the most likely group being 7 to 24 year old males, is probably due to family pressures to go and see a part of their culture when they are young to help educate them of their native culture. The general audience to cinemas is most likely to be 15 to 24 year olds. This is to be expected as they have the most leisure time of all the age groups.

All statistical information was acquired from www.odci.gov and were compiled in June 2002. They will be updating in June this year so these are the most up to date figures on their website. I used the data and produced my own graphs and tables.

Portsmouth cinemas today are far fewer in number than back in the 1930s and 40s. I have provided two maps, one of which shows the locations of

Portsmouth cinemas now, the other indicates' all places of entertainment in the 1930s, including cinemas.

There are four main Portsmouth cinemas now. There is one at the newly built Gun Wharf Quays. This cinema is a Warner Village cinema opened in 2001. It has eleven screens and 2855 seats. It is owned and run by the Time Warner AOL Company. In the same complex as this cinema there are many restaurants including Burger King, Ha Ha Bar, Tiger Tiger, Pizza Express and Tootsie's. There are also nightclubs, a traditional English pub and many bars. Gun Wharf is also a place of shopping with many designer factory stores.

The overall experience of this cinema is inclusive of its surroundings. People may be at Gun Wharf to shop and then decide to go see a movie. They may go for an evening meal then catch a late night showing at the cinema. Or, of course, they may make a beeline to this cinema because it is the closest to them and showing the film the desire to see.

Cinema now is less about the actual film being watched and more about the added extras. By this I mean the popcorn, the hotdogs, the ice cream, the soft drinks, sweets and nachos all offered at the food and drinks counter in the foyer. Maybe this is part of the escapism now, just like the fishponds, potted palms and posh dressed ushers were back in the 30s and 40s. I guess the only place where people go to the cinema to solely watch the film would be an art

cinema where the patrons are mostly film intellectuals who wish to get deeper meaning from the film they watch instead of just going to the movies for a quick fix of entertainment and rest bite from their day to day routine.

The Odeon cinema on London Road in Portsmouth is part of the largest cinema chain in Britain. It opened in the late 80s early 90s. This cinema has four screens and 631 seats. Odeon was founded by Oscar Deutsch in 1930 who got the name from some of the letters of his closest family members, oh how sentimental. J Arthur Rank acquired the company in 1942 and it remained under the ownership of the Rank Group for a further fifty-eight years.

Odeon was later purchased by Cinven on 21st February 2000 and merged with the ABC cinema chain. They revitalised and re-branded all the ABC cinemas and thus Odeon was now a 'superchain' within the cinema world. 2003 saw a change of ownership to WestLB, The Entertainment Group and Robert Tchenguiz of Rotch.

The Carlton Cinema on the High Street on Cosham was reopened this year, 2003 on the 24th of January. Most people would say that the Warner Village cinema at Gun Wharf was the last cinema to be opened in Portsmouth but they are wrong!

After shutting its doors on the 2nd January 2003, it re opened and the staff came back to work on the 24th January thanks to Reeltime Cinemas who re opened the cinema under its original name – the Carlton. The building is now a contender for an entry into the Guinness Book of Records for the shortest cinema closure ever. Before its temporary closure the Carlton had a history full of name changes.

Jack Buchanan opened the Carlton on the 28th February 1934. It was a white art deco building with 1,298 seats. The architect was RA Thomas and the first film to be shown there was 'That's a Good Girl'. It was then taken over by ABC (the original) in 1937 but then in 1940 the cinema took a direct hit from a German bomb during a performance of *'Elizabeth and Essex'*. After the bombing it was rebuilt and re opened a year later on Christmas Eve 1941. It became an Essoldo in 1949 but stayed in war camouflage paint until 1967.

It was modernised in 1968 by introducing a 'Luxury Lounge' with 559 seats. It became a Classic in 1972 then ten years later, Cannon took it over. A hurricane in 1990 took most of the roof off and the refit included new seats and screens plus all three auditoria were re-carpeted and chandeliers were added in every screen. In May of 1990 it reopened after a short period under Virgin. Six years later it became an ABC. The last films to be shown were Lord of the Rings – The Two Towers, Die Another Day, The Santa Clause and Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets.

When the Carlton reopened this year (2003) two people at the opening had met at that very same cinema some forty-three years ago! The happy couple Portsmouth North MP Syd Rapson and his wife Phyllis reopened the Carlton with Reeltime Cinemas Managing Director Mike Vickers and cinema manager Vivienne Smith on the 24th January 2003. The saved cinema now has three screens and 666 seats. They plan to show art house films alongside new releases.

Finally, we come to the Port Solent cinema owned by UCI that opened in 1992. The Port Solent Marina Complex houses the UCI cinema, many restaurants and bars, including The Mermaid Pub and Restaurant, The Boardwalk Pub and Restaurant, a Mexican restaurant called Chiquito's, an Italian and The Chicken Shack. There is also a David Lloyd Health and Fitness Club, surf and outdoors wear shops and a few other gift and novelty shops. There has been much housing built around this area since the marina complex was made and the marina itself renovated. This cinema has six screens and 788 seats.

From my research I have heard some lovely stories of how cinemas were and little anecdotes. I have been saddened by the demolition and bombing of some fine cinemas, but also heartened that the Carlton cinema was reopened this year and will now continue to entertain many more audiences in its cinematic life. The cinema's that stand in Portsmouth now may one day be written

about in the same heartfelt way as the cinemas on the 30s and 40s can be read about now.

Cinema is an important part of life still today for many of us and I hope the trend of going to the cinema never dies due to the ever increasing love of home cinema with surround sound and DVD extra features. I stay optimistic that this will never happen, as people love the experience that is the picture house, so dearly.

To the many people I contacted for information about this project, I thank you all very much, as without you this would not have been possible.