

The First Picture Shows

The first moving picture shows were screened at all sorts of venues including circuses, town halls, theatres, shops, fairgrounds, department stores and almost anywhere except cinemas as such, which did not come into existence until 1907. The first English building designed specifically for film shows was probably the Central Hall in Colne, Lancashire, which opened in 1907. The novelty of the moving image was particularly welcome as an extra seaside attraction, and the resorts proved fertile ground for a new band of cinema entrepreneurs. The few years between 1907 and the start of the First World War saw the incorporation of 34 resort-based companies promoting cinemas and some fine examples of early English cinema design built at the seaside.

The antecedents of the moving picture were magic lantern shows, mutoscopes, kinoscopes and other turn of the century variations. The magic lantern could produce imitation movement on a screen for viewing by a small audience. The mutoscope simulated motion for an individual viewer. A handle on the mutoscope case was turned, causing an illuminated reel of photographs to pass rapidly before the viewing slot; it was a brief, enjoyable but unconvincing entertainment. The kinoscope used bands of film, but again the mechanism required individual viewing, and it was not until a screen could be used to show the film to an audience that moving pictures became more than a fairground novelty.

This occurred in 1902 in America, and many of the first sites for showing moving pictures were converted shops, though travelling shows were popular at English fairs and other sites until around 1912.

It soon became clear to showmen and theatre impresarios that money could be made from moving pictures, which often featured on variety act bills in music halls in the early years of the 20th century. 'All picture' shows were increasing by 1907, and conversion of existing buildings to cinemas became common; one craze gave way to another and skating rinks often became cinemas, as with the Cleethorpes Rinkeries which became the Royal Cinema in 1912. The earliest purpose-built seaside cinema was probably the Gem, opened 4 July 1908 at Great Yarmouth, but it was certainly not the first seaside film theatre. Lowestoft Hippodrome, opened 1904 as a circus-cum-theatre, showed films alone during the 1906 summer season, and many other seaside theatres and halls may have done the same or combined films and live acts. The 1909 Cinematograph Act, which came into effect on 1 January 1910, encouraged the construction of purpose-built cinemas, since it laid down strict safety regulations, including the provision of a fire-resistant projection booth; the cellulose-nitrate based films of the time were highly inflammable when old or decomposing.

The first resort-based joint stock cinema company was probably Southport Picturedrome Limited, incorporated 1909, but early seaside cinema provision ranged from imposing classical edifices owned by large cinema chains to temporary structures run by local showmen. A day tripper in the small resort of New Brighton in 1907 would have been able to choose between

three cinematic attractions: 'The Truly Wonderful Chronophone Talking, Singing and Dancing Pictures' shown in the huge Grand Tower Theatre, films at the town's first permanent cinema, the converted Palace Theatre, and Hale's Tours of the World, which took place in a structure resembling a railway carriage situated in the Tower Grounds. For 6d a head the audience was treated to travel films and appropriate sound effects while the carriage was shaken to simulate motion; this novelty was the invention of George Hale of Kansas City, who sold replicas of his show throughout America before bringing it to Britain in 1906.

Hale's lasted only one season in New Brighton, and it was 1912 before the town had its first purpose-built cinema, the Court Picture House, owned by Mersey Halls Limited. Picture Land, a small public hall, also opened 1912. The short-lived Daylight Cinema, opened 1913, was no more than an awning and a screen in a sheltered position on Tower Promenade. The Tivoli, also on Tower Promenade, opened 1914 and combined cinema and variety shows. Most of these cinemas had access from the Promenade, and several were doubtless helped by their close proximity to the Tower. Initially their programmes continued the seaside novelty tradition, as did some of their structures.

The most imposing and architecturally interesting cinemas were generally built by the rapidly growing cinema chains, many of which were formed at the end of the 1900s. Provincial Cinematograph Theatres Limited, the London-based picture house chain, was registered in November 1909, while National Electric Theatres, which ran the Electric Theatre and Theatre-de-Luxe chains, originated in 1908. Weisker Brothers of Liverpool was the most important northern circuit around 1914 with 22 cinemas, including the Southport Picturedrome. The Picturedrome was a basic shed with an idiosyncratic Edwardian Baroque facade centred on a shining dome; its architects were probably Campbell and Fairhurst. It seems likely that Weisker Brothers had taken over the cinema from Southport Picturedrome Limited, rather than built it themselves. Two much larger cinemas were opened in the town in 1914, the Palladium and the Picture Palace, both designed by local architect George E. Tonge. The twin towers of the Palladium facade were connected by first and second floor balconies and a ground floor arcade. This Edwardian Baroque creation seated 1,500 and cost over £30,000, the organ alone costing £6,000. The internal colour scheme was a restrained grey, cream and white with a few touches of gold, and the carpets and curtains in pink - a contrast to the rich colours of the typical Victorian theatre interior. The Palladium was demolished in the 1980s but the Picture Palace still stands. It was designed in the same style as the Palladium but was a smaller cinema, costing only £7,000. It was faced in terracotta and white glazed faience, which had become a popular material for cinema facades. It was hard-wearing and the mouldings could be produced in Classical style which, with the shiny white surface, emphasised that the cinema was a modern entertainment, far removed from the colourful Oriental ornament of the Victorian theatre. The customer could be assured of a novel experience in respectable surroundings.

A pale buff terracotta in ornate Edwardian Baroque style was used to achieve the same effect on the Great Yarmouth Gem Cinema in 1908 by Arthur S. Hewitt. 1,500 electric light bulbs fixed to the facade transformed the Gem at night into 'The Palace of 5,000 Lights', quickly bringing back the disreputable fairground atmosphere to the sea front. The Gem was managed by the young Charles B. Cochran, later the world-renowned impresario, who put on a continuous film show daily from 11.00 am until 11.00 pm in the long, shed-like auditorium. The Gem, now adorned with windmill sails in the centre of its facade and known as the Windmill, is a listed building and still functions partly as a cinema.

The Gem was leased by E. V. Barr Limited. Barr was a local trader with interests in several cinemas in the Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth area; he was the lessee of the Empire on Great Yarmouth's Marine Parade, not far from the Gem, and had a stake in the Gorleston Coliseum, opened August Bank Holiday 1913 and demolished 1970. The Empire, opened July 1911, was built for the Yarmouth and Gorleston Investment and Building Company and was another work by A. S. Hewitt. Its Edwardian Baroque facade, a triumphal arch framed by giant, fluted, Ionic columns, was clad in Leeds Fireclay Company buff terracotta. The interior was in sumptuous Louis XIV style. The Empire, minus some of its decorative flourishes but basically unchanged, is still a cinema.

Gorleston on Sea, the small and select resort across the River Yare from Great Yarmouth, was the site of one of the East Counties Electric Theatres Limited cinemas, Filmland, opened 1913. The East Counties chain was run by Frederick Holmes Cooper of Wisbech, where he opened his first Electric Theatre in 1910. At Gorleston, Cooper and local auctioneer A. V. George collaborated on Filmland, which was designed by another local man, G. Reeve. The interior featured leather-padded seating, and the cinema was usually referred to in its early days as the Gorleston Cosy; it was destroyed in a Second World War air raid. After Filmland, Cooper built the Great Yarmouth Regent, which opened in 1914. It was an extravagant creation by Francis Burdett Ward, the Wisbech architect responsible for at least six of Cooper's cinemas. Ward produced a rich Edwardian Baroque design, its facade topped by a carved stone panel representing the arts, below which was a semicircular stained glass window showing the name. The entrance was protected by an elegant wrought-iron and glass canopy, which ran the length of the facade. The interior was in French Classical style with expensive fittings; Wilton carpets, electric candelabra and oak panelling adorned the auditorium, which could seat 1,679 with 50 in boxes. The listed Regent is now a bingo hall.

Norwich showman Charles Thurston was behind the building of the Harwich Electric Palace cinema, which opened on 29 November 1911. This basic, barrel-vaulted shed with its Baroque facade was the first important work of architect Harold Ridley Hooper (1885-1953) of Ipswich, who went on to design many public houses. It seated only 308, took 18 weeks to build and

cost £1,500, but has survived with many of its fittings intact and was restored in the late 1970s.

On the south coast, the Duke of York cinema opened in 1910 at Brighton, promoted by the Wyatt family who had built the theatre of the same name in London. It was another Classical design, by Brighton architects Clayton and Black, who had worked on the reconstruction of the local Theatre Royal. A theatre impresario was also behind the introduction of cinema to nearby Worthing. Carl Adolf Seebold, a German Swiss, arrived in Worthing in 1904 and soon took a controlling interest in the town's Theatre Royal. During the next few years he produced plays and pantomimes for Worthing and other theatres and built the Kursaal, sited to the east of Worthing Pier, in 1910. The building, dominated by its elegant dome, consisted of a roller skating rink known as the Coronation Hall and a small upper room which served as a cinema. It was renamed the Dome at the onset of the First World War and, in 1921-22, after the skating craze had died away, Seebold converted the Hall to a cinema for some £8,000. In 1926 he bought the Worthing Picturedrome, opened in 1914. The Dome Cinema has been in continuous cinematic use since 1910 and, because of its eye-catching design and starring role in the film *Wish You Were Here*, has become one of the best-known of the seaside cinemas.

Two more early Classical picture palaces are in the west country, at Weston-super-Mare and Paignton. The Regent Street Picture House was built for Weston-super-Mare Picture House Limited and opened in 1913. The architect was W. H. Watkins, a Bristol man who specialised in cinemas, and his Classical Regent Street facade, executed in Bath stone and topped by a large statue, was exceedingly formal for an entertainment building. The finely detailed Classical auditorium seated 1,500; the Picture House is now a bingo hall. The Paignton Picture House, now Torbay Cinema, opened in 1907 with a mixture of magic lantern and moving picture shows, becoming a full-time cinema in 1913, when Paignton Picture House Limited was incorporated. The cinema's architectural style combines Baroque with Art Nouveau detail.

Edwardian Baroque was the leading style for both seaside and inland cinemas before 1914, often executed in clean-cut, pale faience. The good taste implied by this slightly pompous image was rejected by the architects of some cinemas in favour of designs which offered the potential customer a more traditional sign of the pleasures to come, Indian motifs. The Putney Globe (c1910) and the Liverpool Picture House (c1913) both used variations on chatri as eyecatchers atop their facades. The Indian style, redolent of 19th century entertainment buildings, never gathered much support from cinema architects, who did not solve the problem of producing an appropriate form for the new building type until the 1930s. There were over 3,500 cinemas in Britain by 1914 but, although this represented a great opportunity for architects in terms of new and converted buildings, few architects of high renown bothered with the form before the First World War. This is perhaps a pity, but it did offer otherwise unsung architects such as A. S. Hewitt, designer of Great Yarmouth's Gem and Empire, the chance to produce

memorable buildings on prime sites. The Classical cinema theatres brought novelty to the seaside in surroundings of great respectability, but the best of the early seaside cinemas were the idiosyncratic designs which sadly led nowhere in terms of future chain-dominated cinema architecture.

The most unusual of the pre-1914 seaside cinemas was the Indo-Classical Blackpool Casino, built at the entrance to the Pleasure Beach in 1913. It was a product of the move into indoor entertainments which Blackpool Pleasure Beach Limited instigated in 1910. The Casino was constructed from reinforced concrete in the style of an Indian palace and contained a restaurant, billiard room, offices and a 700-seat cinema theatre. Electric light bulbs were used to illuminate the Casino like the Great Yarmouth Gem and, during the night, the domed and arcaded Casino appeared as a fantasy palace at the end of the Promenade. Its design echoed the imperial style of many Pleasure Beach rides, but these motifs disappeared in the 1920s and 1930s as the Empire began to disintegrate and the Victorian association of Indian and Oriental decoration with pleasure faded away. Fun and Modernism were temporarily joined in the public mind, and the Casino was demolished in 1937 to be succeeded in 1939 by Joseph Emberton's circular white Casino, its dizzy spiral stair tower signifying the delights within the Pleasure Beach; thus one great seaside building replaced another.