

Cinemas in Bexley

With its rapid rise from the penny gaffs to the super cinemas of the 1930s and massive popularity for over fifty years, the cinema will be remembered as the entertainment phenomenon of the 20th century.

The "Cineworld" multiplex cinema in Bexleyheath Broadway is the only cinema remaining in the London Borough of Bexley. Many others have been either demolished or converted to bingo halls but the local picture houses are still some of the best-remembered buildings in the district.

Penny gaffs in public halls

The earliest projected films were first shown publicly in this country in 1896 and in the early years of the 20th century single reel films, lasting about ten minutes, could be seen in the travelling bioscope shows and the first cinemas - the "penny gaffs". Until 1909 films were most commonly seen on one, two or three nights a week in the local public hall. In the local area films were shown by the Walturdaw Company at Erith Public Hall and Bexleyheath Public Hall, in the Pincott Hall in Bexleyheath, the King's Hall in Sidcup, at East Wickham Parish Hall and, on Saturday nights, in the Freemantle Hall in Bexley. In 1909 the Cinematograph Act was passed, putting more stringent fire regulations into effect. Many new purpose-built cinemas were erected and a number of the old halls were converted to sole cinema use. Owners were now able to attract customers to their new picture houses by advertising that they complied with the new regulations.

The early cinemas

By 1913 "the flicks" was firmly established as a popular entertainment and a spate of cinema building and conversion took place in Bexley. Several of the public halls were converted to permanent cinema use. During 1909 the Bexleyheath Public Hall near the Clock Tower became "Pease's Perfect Pictures" and also featured variety artists. One of these, the comedy singer Harry Quinton, took over the hall in December and within a year it has become the "Picture Palace". An imposing stone-faced facade was built in 1929 and, despite being gutted by fire in 1934, the "Picture Palace" continued to show films

(later as "The Astor") until the late 1960s, when it became a bingo hall. The building has since been demolished.

The public hall in Erith High Street also changed over to films in 1913 under Sidney Bacon, an important name in local cinemas, but had a shorter life as plans to remodel the building as a dance hall were accepted in 1926. It later became Mitchells' Second-hand Store and was gutted by fire in the 1960s.

In April 1913 plans to convert a small auction room in Crabtree Manorway to "a cinematograph picture palace" were submitted by W. Roberts of Erith. After 1924 the cinema became known as "The Queensland", taking its name from the Queensland Stores next door. This shop had doors from the Empire Exhibition at Wembley depicting Queensland in Australia. The cinema later became a skating rink and a Pentecostal Baptist Church.

The earliest purpose-built cinema in the borough seems to have been a small 540 seat "Cinema Picture Palace" together with a bowling alley, built at the junction of Sidcup Hill and Durham Road. It closed in 1922 and was later used as a garage. It was eventually demolished in the early 1970s.

On 27 July 1913 the "Oxford Cinema" was opened at 40 High Street in Erith. It was built by Sidney Bacon's Pictures Ltd. Like most of the early cinemas, it was a plain hall with an elaborate facade, in this case classical in design with a porticoed entrance. The building was later purchased by the local authority and leased to the Guild Playhouse in 1949. The rebuilt Playhouse still retains part of the Oxford cinema. In 2006, as part of the Erith Riverside Conservation Area Improvements Project, the frontage of the theatre was modernized, with new exterior lighting and an electronic marquee sign.

Also in 1913, the New Cinema in Bexleyheath Broadway opened. It was soon known as "The Broadway Cinema" and underwent enlargement in 1929. It had seating for 716 people and the licenses issued in 1932 show that Bexleyheath Cinemas Ltd had to pay £5 for music and dancing, £5 for cinematograph and £6 for stage plays. The cinema closed in the 1950s but the distinctive white stuccoed building can still be seen in the Broadway opposite Christchurch.

The sixth cinema to be built or converted in the area in 1913 was "The Grand", built in Picardy Street at the corner of Sheridan Road in Belvedere. Building began on the 300-seater cinema in June and it eventually cost £800. This small picture house also had a plain classical frontage and later plans for a gallery were turned down. By 1931 it was called "The Cosy Cinema" and was owned by British Comedies Ltd. It later became "The KitKat Ballroom" but was eventually demolished and flats now occupy the site.

The twenties

Cinema building had received a setback during the First World War and in the years immediately following, when there were restrictions on construction, but the 1920s saw resurgence in cinema building in the borough.

In 1921 Sidney Bacon leased the Princesses Theatre at Crayford from Vickers Ltd. The theatre had been showing films on several evenings a week since 1916 but it was now given over to cinema with occasional music hall artistes. Sound equipment was installed in August 1930 and the theatre, now called "The Ritz", continued to be successful until it too suffered in the post-Second World War decline. It eventually closed in 1957.

A more unusual conversion took place in Fraser Road, Erith. The Primitive Methodist Chapel had been built in 1900 but on 12 November 1923 it opened as The Tower cinema, with F.W. Pamplin of Abbey Wood credited as the architects. The cinema underwent several name changes over the years, to "The Rialto", "The Rex" and "The Tivoli" and specialised in horror films.

All of the early cinemas in the Bexley area had been small, single storey, box-like auditoriums seating only a few hundred people. In 1926 Sidney Bacon opened his 1,244-seater cinema in Pier Road, Erith – "The Picture House". It was one of the earliest luxury cinemas to be built, with a spacious and comfortable interior and impressive exterior which included a columned entrance. The cinema was later called "The Ritz" and eventually closed in 1956. A row of shops now stands on the site opposite Erith Market.

The 1920s also saw a cinema tragedy in Bexley. By 1929 the East Wickham Parish hall was known as the "Welling Kinema" and served

a large population in the hutments built in East Wickham after the First World War. On 16 July 1929 a fire broke out during a showing of "Ghost in the Night". A new lantern or projector, which had not been tested, was being used and a spark from it flew into the open box of films in the re-winding room.

The nitrate film then in use was highly inflammable and the room was soon engulfed in flames. The film stopped and the 80 people in the cinema were led out while the pianist continued to play. The fire brigade arrived within seven minutes but the cinematograph operator, 19-year-old Randolph Brown, and his 14-year-old assistant, Ernest Tomkins, died in the fire. Both the cinema management and the local council were criticised in the investigation which followed but the "Welling Kinema" continued to show films for a number of years.

The coming of sound

When "The Jazz Singer" was released in America in 1927 the film world waited to see if the public would take to the new "talkies". They did and the cinemas took part in a race to open with sound films. The winner in Bexley was "The Picture House" in Erith, which opened with "The Broadway Melody" on 14 October 1929. The conversion to sound had been achieved overnight and blankets were placed behind the screen to ensure that none of the new sound was lost. The "Picture Palace" in Bexleyheath had already closed for alterations and re-opened on 4 November 1929 with "Fox Movietone Follies of 1929". "The Broadway Cinema" had been adding variety acts to its bill in an attempt to compete but eventually went over to sound in January 1930. It attempted to make up for lost time by claiming "You can hear them best at the Broadway Theatre". Many of the smaller picture houses had to continue to show silent films until they were able to afford the costly conversion to sound equipment. The sound films brought in even larger audiences and it was to cope with the increased demand that the age of the "super" cinemas began.

The "super" cinemas

The call was now for bigger and better cinemas, and "supers" met this with grandiose designs and seating for between one and two thousand people. The usual design was a fan-shaped auditorium with a single balcony where a cantilevered circle overhung a substantial area at the back of the stalls. They were basically steel frames clad in

a brick box, often faced with stone or faience tiles, and could be built at great speed. In 1930 alterations were made to the "King's Hall" in Sidcup and in 1932 it opened as the 1,036-seater "Regal Cinema". Further alterations took place in 1948 and in 1963 it became the ABC. It closed in August 2000.

On 3 September 1934 Sidney Bacon's Pictures Ltd opened the "Regal Cinema" in Bexleyheath Broadway. Its square red-brick facade is typical of its architect, Robert Cromie, who designed a number of "Regals". It was a very large cinema with a 2,044-seater auditorium. The "Regal" also had a much-loved feature of the "supers", a cinema organ, in this case a Compton, which was played by Robinson Cleaver and featured in radio broadcasts. The organ was destroyed when a bomb hit the cinema in 1945 and the Regal eventually became the ABC, which closed in 1987. The site is now occupied by an Asda superstore.

The best known cinema chain of the 1930s were the "Odeons", run by Oscar Deutsch. They had a distinctive standardised design and simple interior, which made them quick and cheap to build. The first "Odeon" to be designed by the well-known architect, George Coles, was the "Odeon" at Upper Wickham Lane in Welling. Thousands crowded in the street for the opening on 22 October 1934 and 1,356 people watched Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert in "It Happened One Night". The "Odeon" switched to bingo in 1961. The "Odeon" at Halfway Street in Sidcup seated 1,264 people and opened on 21 October 1935. It became Lamorbey Swimming Baths in 1967. The baths were demolished in 2008 and acquired by the Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance for redevelopment but the old "Odeon" façade remains intact.

In 1936 Coles designed the "Odeon", Erith as an absolutely typical "Odeon", with its slim faience-faced advertising tower contrasting with the more horizontally emphasized brick and faience body of the cinema. It opened on 26 February 1938 and seated 1,240 people. The cinema was later used as a bingo hall.

On 26 July 1937 the Blackfen Theatre Company opened the "Plaza" in Westwood Lane, Blackfen. As an independent cinema away from the big circuits it was not able to show the latest films but did change its programme twice a week. The cinema later became the "Rex", then

an "Odeon" but it was demolished in 1962 and a supermarket now stands on the site.

The most super of the "supers" in Bexley was the "Granada" in Bellegrove Road, Welling. It was opened on 29 January 1938 by Jessie Matthews and Sonnie Hale and the audience saw the films "Kid Galahad" and "Easy Living". The 1,716-seater cinema was the only "Granada" designed by George Coles and had an interior designed by the famous Theodor Komisarjevsky. Although the decor was on a smaller scale than that of the fabulous "Granadas" at Tooting and Woolwich, it was still a fantasy of Venetian gothic and classical-style plasterwork with huge art deco light fittings. The Granada eventually closed in 1983.

The Second World War stopped cinema building and in the 1950s cinema had lost its popularity to television. Many cinemas have been converted to bingo or other use but many others are now just a memory.