

## The Theatre Royal – with perceptions and reflections from the 1950' and 60's

Situated in Ward's End at the end of Southgate - adjacent to a cigar factory and built on the site of a previous theatre that was fire ravaged in 1904 - the replacement Theatre Royal was opened to the public in 1905. Constructed larger in size than the previous theatre, the new Theatre Royal attracted Halifax people in even great numbers. *House full* was not uncommon. But this was not to last.



*The significance attached to a date carved into the stone work of a building is in most circumstances related to when the building was erected. But curiously, this is not the case with regard to the Theatre Royal. The date 1790 - 1904 so prominently displayed here commemorates the previous theatre that stood on the site. 1790, the first Theatre Royal was built. 1904, it was destroyed by fire. The new Theatre Royal occupied not only the site of the previous theatre but also the site of four dwellings, a shop and the Shakespeare Tavern.*

In 1933 the Theatre Royal changed from stage to screen. With the advent of talking-pictures in 1929, dwindling live-performance attendances and very real competition from the Palace Theatre across the street the business decision to convert to the silver screen was a no-brainer. Movies moved in. Money was now to be made from celluloid film - not plays, stage acts or chorus lines. And so it proved. Well at least until 1937 when a prolonged pause to proceedings was enforced. Another fire. Another reason to start again.

When the Royal re-opened in 1939 it now contained an auditorium specifically designed for cinema-goers. And this was a necessity for in the previous year two modern state-of-the-art town centre picture houses had been erected; the Odeon and the Regal. Competition for cinema patrons was more intense than ever. As many as eleven cinemas now operated in the town centre and outer districts of Halifax. Cinema-going in Halifax was in its hay-day. Everywhere long queues formed to see the latest releases; indeed there were also queues for those films that had been around for some time. And this continued for the next two decades.

Long queues formed at the Royal for glitzy Hollywood productions, Ealing comedies and feel-good, feel-proud British war-time and post-war films. Long queues in the 1950's regularly snaked down the side ally, a hemmed-in, high-sided, sun-starved cul-de-sac so grandly named Shakespeare Street. Here was the side entrance to the cheaper seats at the front of house. Here was the side door through which in 1957 impatient and excited teenagers pressed forward to pay their 6 pence admittance at the tiny kiosk, before descending the narrow flight of stone steps to reach a basement entrance through which they passed. The reason? Elvis Presley in his first movie *Love Me Tender*.

Two years later many of these teenagers, those now eighteen and those who now pretended to be, once again joined the Shakespeare Street queues to see the X-rated film *Room at the Top*. Not only was this nationally the third most popular film of 1959 (despite its X rating and therefore limiting audience numbers) but it was also filmed on location in Halifax; the town being called Warley in the best selling novel by John Braine and for some unknown reason re-named Warnley in the film.



*The building to the right is the old cigar factory. No benefit to cigar smoking theatre patrons in the Victorian era since smoking in public places was banned until 1901. To the left is the grandly named Shakespeare Street, the narrow ally cul-de-sac down which 1950's and 60's picture-goers patiently queued to see the latest release. When a seat became vacant you were admitted, no matter how much of the film had already been shown. And there you stayed until you did 'catch-up' at the next showing. Ever helpful, the usherette with her beaming torch illuminated the vacant seats in the middle of darkened rows. And in those days cinema audiences really did view in the dark - pitch dark.*

*Room at the Top* was the first of the *British New Wave* of realistic film dramas; *kitchen sink dramas* as they came to be called. *Room at the Top* was one of a new generation of British films that hurriedly revolutionised the British film industry and markedly altered the expectations of the British viewing public. Dodgy West Yorkshire accent apart, the young Laurence Harvey was sensational as ambitious woman-magnet Joe Lampton. And Simone Signoret was likewise sensational in her role – but even more so. She portrayed the forty-something Alice Aisgill as the ultimate vulnerable velvet-textured siren. As Anthony remarked '*Room at the Top* was filmed in smokey black and white, but Signoret was pure vibrant technicolour'. No wonder she received a Hollywood Oscar for best actress. And no wonder there was an Oscar for best writing – she along with Harvey made every written word count.

Being the cinema to show *Room at the Top* to Halifax people was a bit of a coup for the Royal. Other *New Wave* films followed. Again these films attracted large audiences; but the tide had now turned for the cinema industry. Films at the Royal were now competing with an ever growing interest in what television could offer. In addition alternative forms of entertainment were becoming ever more available and ever more affordable. Nevertheless films continued to be screened there until the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, making the Royal one of the last Halifax cinemas to close; the Regal being the last to draw its curtains in 2002.

When eventually the Royal ran the last set of credits the redundant projectionist with his reels of 35mm celluloid film was replaced by the bingo caller with his tub of 100 plastic numbered balls. Live entertainment had once again returned to the old Theatre Royal – although in a very different guise to that of 1905. But unlucky for some this venture into bingo didn't last. The bingo hall converted into night club premises - yet another failed enterprise. Sadly today the Theatre Royal now stands unused, somewhat unloved, boarded-up and awaiting redevelopment.

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