

SLOUGH CINEMAS REVISITED

As an adolescent I visited relatives in Slough for a few days during the summers of 1965 to 1969, inclusive. At that time the town was in Buckinghamshire but is now in Berkshire following local government changes in the 1970's.

During that time I visited three cinemas in Slough and one in Windsor. I decided to research these cinemas and, in carrying out the work, I would express my gratitude to Tony Pilmer and Ros Sirr of Slough Library for their detective work in locating relevant articles from the local press. Appreciation is also extended to David Simpson who was manager of Slough's Granada Cinema from November 1974 to September 1987 and was the longest serving manager of that cinema. A telephone conversation with Ros at the library revealed that Mr. Simpson was a reader there. With the co-operation of the library staff I was able to correspond with Mr. Simpson and he took the trouble to write me two fascinating and detailed letters about the town's cinemas. He has given permission to use the information. I would also wish to acknowledge my gratitude to the editors of the Slough Observer and Slough Express for allowing me to use the information contained in their articles. **Special thanks goes to the Slough & Windsor Observer (holder of the copyright) for their kind permission to reproduce the entertainment page from their edition of Thursday 22 March 1951 which shows the films running at the local cinemas.**

Appreciation is extended to the excellent library staff for the provision and use of photographs in this article including those from the Reg Harrison collection and, also, to the present management of the Gala bingo club for their co-operation in allowing the images of the Adelphi to be taken. It is the efforts of all these people that have turned a nice idea into a viable article.

The first Slough cinema I visited was the Ambassador in 1966 to see Born Free. At that time there were two other cinemas in the town: the Granada and Adelphi. Two were open in nearby Windsor: the ABC and ABC Regal though the newspaper listings from 1951 shows the existence of a third one, the Empire.

In the summer of 1967 I saw Old Yeller at the Adelphi and The Gnome – Mobile at the Granada. I also saw a double bill of King Solomon's Mines and Seven Brides for Seven Brothers at the Ambassador.

When I visited Slough in 1968 the Ambassador was a bingo hall and the ABC Regal at Windsor was closed. During that visit I saw Blackbeard's Ghost at the Adelphi and went to London to see The Charge of the Light Brigade at the Metropole, next to Victoria Station.

The summer of 1969 saw me at the ABC at Windsor for Oh, What a Lovely War. I also went to the Theatre Royal at Windsor to see Dracula (play).

The history of the Slough cinemas follows the same pattern as that of other towns and cities, namely, humble beginnings in the early years of the century, increased popularity in the twenties, an explosion of activity in the thirties with the advent of talking films and the building of super cinemas, the peak of attendances during the nostalgia and increased citizenship of the war years and then the perceptible decline from the early fifties. All this followed by the construction of a multiplex in the late eighties. Yet whilst the model is compatible with national trends the cinemas themselves all had unique identities and imparted individual experiences.

As best as I have been able this is a consolidated account of those cinemas.

Early beginnings

Three cinemas were opened in Slough between 1910 and 1912. On 1 August 1910 Herbert George Wilson started showing films in a hall at the back of the Crown Hotel in Windsor Road. Mr. Wilson had formed a private company, the Slough Picture Hall Company, and he also owned the Crown Hotel.

The cinema was one of the first in the South East. It became very popular and Mr. Wilson hired a larger room at the town's Public Hall to show films. This cinema lasted till 1921.

A short-lived picture hall in Slough High Street opened in July 1911 but closed during the First World War.

Another cinema, the Empire Cinema Palace, opened in the Chalvey area of the town in February 1912. It did not survive long after the outbreak of the First World War.

The Golden Years and Beyond **Palace/Century**

As cinemas became popular Herbert George Wilson formed a new public company, the Slough Picture Theatre Company Limited and built the Palace Cinema in Slough High Street at a cost of £35,000.

This cinema was opened on 1 September 1921 by Major-General C. W. Carteret, who was a representative of Princess Alice of Athlone.

The opening programme included the tenth episode of a serial, Elmo the Fearless, a film based on a novel by Stanley Weyman called A Gentleman of France and, "a fascinating story of a woman who dared all for love" called Billions starring, "The Incomparable Nazimova." Proceeds from the opening performance went to the Princess Alice Home for Disabled Soldiers and Sailors.

On 16 August 1945 there occurred a bizarre event worthy of an Ealing comedy. Whilst the town celebrated victory over Japan (VJ Day) and the end of the Second World War the Palace was destroyed by fire in the early hours of that morning.

The Windsor Express of the 17 August 1945 carried the headline, "Escaped Fire Bombs – Burnt Out on First Night of Peace." The article described the Palace as Slough's first modern cinema. Built by Messrs. H. D. Bowyer and sons the cinema originally seated 800 to 1000 people but was later modernised and extended to accommodate an audience of between 1200 and 1400. The fire was discovered by the cinema manager, Mr. T. Allen. Despite efforts to extinguish the fire the auditorium was destroyed though firemen managed to prevent it spreading to the foyer and adjoining property.

The cause of the fire was never discovered. One theory was that some revellers may have thrown a firework through an open door or window just as the cinema was closing for the evening and that woodwork on the stage smouldered for some hours before its discovery.

If that was the case the title of the last film shown at the cinema seems appropriate. With the irony that seems to mark these occasions it was called, "Secret Enemies."

The Granada Company rebuilt the Palace renaming it the Century. It opened in 1949.

Adelphi

The Slough, Eton and Windsor Observer of 15 February 1929 carried an article about a planned new cinema for the town. It was to be built on the Bath Road and would be called the Adelphi. The intended building would allow 2,002 seats, would have a spacious foyer with waiting areas and cloakrooms. An organ would be installed on the stage.

The plans came to fruition and the cinema opened on 17 February 1930. It was to be the first of the town's super cinemas and was built on the site of two early Victorian mansions "Montem" and "Montrose." The cinema was the brainchild of Councillor E. T. Bowyer (who performed the opening ceremony of the Commodore a few years later) and Fredrick Iona

Smith. The Adelphi was designed by Eric Norman Bailey of Maidenhead and built by H. D. Bowyer and sons. The cinema had 2014 seats, a dance hall with spring floor, a stage for live shows and a free car park at its front.

The opening performance included: news magazines, the film "On With the Show" that was, "reproduced by Western Electric Sound System" and a stage show by Kingsley Lark and Elsie Griffen from the London Coliseum. The Adelphi was taken over by Union Cinemas in 1933 and by Associated British Cinemas (ABC) in 1937. Granada acquired the lease in 1953 and bought the site for £250,000 in 1970.

The live performances at the Adelphi reads like a history of popular entertainment of the twentieth century.

On 27 July 1945 the final function of the Slough Fire Guards was held in the Adelphi Ballroom to mark the conclusion of the Second World War.

Meanwhile, the stage facilities in the cinema saw local societies performing there. Famous artistes to have graced its huge stage have included: Yehudi Menuhin, Billy Cotton, Nana Mouskouri, The Beatles (November 1963), The Rolling Stones, Roy Orbison, Little Richard and the Walker Brothers. Wrestling bouts have also featured. Max Miller appeared for one week in May 1951.

The Slough Observer of Friday February 2 1973 contained an interview with a cashier of 20 years' service at the Adelphi. The lady recalled the day the Rolling Stones arrived. She did not recognise them and asked them to leave due to their scruffy appearance!

In its day the Adelphi also had Saturday morning children's shows.

Ambassador

The Ambassador Cinema, Farnham Road, opened on 17 February 1936. The ceremony was performed by Glennis Lorrimer who was working on a film at Beaconsfields with Claude Hulbert. The cinema was built by Manor Park Construction Company Limited. Its architect was Sydney R. Crocker in association with F. C. Mitchell. The total cost of the building and equipment was about £25,000. There were about 1,000 seats in the stalls and 400 in the balcony circle. Unlike other modern cinemas in the town there were no restaurant or ballroom attachments. It was a pure cinema to serve an area of the town away from previous such developments. The cinema formed a building complex that included shops on either side of it.

The opening ceremony was attended by the local MP and the chairman and other members of Slough Urban District Council. Admission charges were 6d, 9d, 1/- and 1/3d in the stalls and 1/3d and 1/6d in the balcony.

The opening films were China Seas starring Clark Gable, Jean Harlow and Wallace Beery and The Girl Who Came Back starring Shirley Grey. The second half of the opening week featured Bonnie Scotland starring Laurel and Hardy.

In 1937 the cinema became part of the London and Southern circuit.

By 1964 the capacity was 1183.

The Ambassador was classed as an Odeon cinema though the name was never changed to Odeon. Who would wish to change such an impressive name as that? The Ambassador usually showed films running at the Granada and Century cinemas in the same week.

I recall during my 1966 visit to Slough, when the number of cinemas was down from five to three, the Ambassador and Granada showed Born Free, in the same week. Similarly, during my 1967 visit they showed Khartoum simultaneously.

Discerning local filmgoers may be aware that the outside scene in The Family Way, when Hywel Bennett and Barry Foster have a scuffle, was filmed in the car park of the

Ambassador. The film was made in 1967 so it is possible that it was screened at the cinema.

This actually leads to an unusual coincidence. I referred to the Metropole at Victoria Station in my introduction. It was used for the interior cinema scene in Brief Encounter.

Granada

The Granada, in Windsor Road, opened on 25 March 1938. It was to hold patrons under its spell for almost 50 years and was part of the circuit founded by Sidney Bernstein. The Slough Granada was built by C. Howard Crane and modelled on the Moorish Style of the Russian cinema architect Theodore Komisarjevsky as were the, now listed, Granadas at Tooting and Woolwich. Slough Granada cost £70,000 to build. It contained 15 cwt. of glass in its light fittings and 11½ tons of marble and terrazzo were imported specially from Rome for its construction. The cinema had 12 “deaf plugs,” earmarked seats wired up to assist the hard of hearing. It took 150 directly employed workmen seven months to build the Granada. The company boasted 98.8% British workmanship and materials and employed 37 permanent staff. The cinema claimed to have “2001 armchairs” – dunlopillo cushioned seats though some sources put the capacity at about 1800. The cinema had a Wurlitzer organ that, in time, was frequently played by Reginald Dixon and Robinson Cleaver. The Wurlitzer was described as commanding, “a world of music from a full symphony orchestra to a Chinese Tom-Tom. The human voice, ships sirens, the roar of an aeroplane, the crash of the surf, even a telephone bell comes within its range.”

The Granada was opened by Leslie Howard who appeared in the first main film to be screened, *It's Love I'm After*. The film also starred Bette Davis and Olivia de Havilland. The supporting film was *Artists and Models* featuring Jack Benny, Ida Lupino, Richard Arlen, Gail Patrick and the Yacht Club Boys. Dudley Beavan performed on the Wurlitzer organ, the Band of the Scots Guards entertained and the Granada Sound News provided the icing on the cake.

Greetings telegrams wishing the new cinema well were received from stars including: Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Clarke Gable, Bette Davis, Edward G. Robinson, Norma Shearer and Charles Laughton.

In years to come children were provided for on Saturday mornings at the Grenadiers Club. A tearoom was included in the building and for many years, the clinking of teacups could be heard by patrons making their way into the cinema circle.

One of the most famous features of the Granada was the Pavement of Fame. Whilst such displays were popular in American cinemas they never proved as popular in the U.K. It is said the idea to have such a pavement at the Granada was that of the chain's founder Sidney Bernstein. It was inaugurated in the year following the cinema's opening by the popular comedian Will Hay.

Due to the close proximity of film studios many stars visited the Granada to leave their hand and footprints and signatures on the concrete slabs outside. Between 1939 and 1951 visitors included: Will Hay, Michael Redgrave, Lex Barker, Robertson Hare, Sabu (the Elephant Boy), Moore Marriott, Jesse Matthews, Sonny Hale, Leslie Banks, Will Fyffe, Graham Moffatt and, lastly, Bette Davis and Bob Hope in 1951.

A newspaper report from August 1945 reveals the King's speech on V.J. day was relayed to the Granada audience, a local performer called Mabel Wakeling sang her own composition,

“We’ve Marched to Tipperary for the Last Time” and led the audience, by way of a finale, in the singing of, “Land of Hope and Glory.”

The Granada staged a pantomime for two weeks in January 1948. It was Aladdin and featured Cyril Fletcher, Joan Turner and The Three Monarchs.

Even during the sunset years of the 1970’s and 1980’s many stars visited the Granada. These included: Diana Dors, Alan Lake, Jack Douglas, Brian Murphy, Madeleine Smith, Robert Brown, Jess Conrad, Laurie Holloway, Steve Race, Alex Munro, USA organist Ashley Miller, Donovan, Sid James and Ronnie Corbett.

For many years there was a kiosk in the building where patrons could write a letter on Granada headed notepaper.

The restaurant closed in 1969.

The Granada underwent tripling in 1973. It managed to keep its circle open whilst the stalls were closed for conversion into two extra cinemas.

The three-screen cinema opened on 15 June 1973. Cinema 1 had 624 seats, screen 2 had 261 with the third studio holding 197. The triple was opened by the film director Gerald Thomas. The opening films were: Young Winston (1), Everything you wanted to know about sex (2) and Cabaret (3).

Wurlitzer organ concerts were revived at the Granada in the 1980’s thanks to the work of the London chapter of the American Theatre Organ Society. Since tripling the organ had been moved behind screen one and the audiences watched the organist play via CCTV. Performers included: Douglas Reeve and Len Rawle.

Commodore/Essoldo

The Manor Park Construction Company Limited also built the Commodore Cinema at Cippenham, a district of Slough. It opened on 30 November 1938. The cinema cost about £50,000 and seated 1500 patrons.

The opening ceremony was attended by 600 guests including the Mayor of Slough, Alderman E.T. Bowyer, representatives from Slough and Maidenhead Borough Councils, and local organisations, and film artists from Pinewood and Denham studios. Proceeds from the opening ceremony were divided equally between Windsor Hospital and Slough Hospital appeal funds. The general public filled the seats in the rest of the cinema on the opening night. A telegram from the actress, Valerie Hobson, wishing the cinema well was read out, by the first manager, Mr. G. F. West. The band of the Grenadier Guards played on the first night. The building included a spacious ballroom. Opening films were: Start Cheering with Jimmy Durante, Deanne Durbin and Walter Connolly and Mad about Music with Herbert Marshall and Arthur Treacher. Andrew Conti, a famous organist, played at the Commodore Wonder Organ.

The Commodore was taken over by the rapidly expanding Essoldo circuit in October 1949 and became the Essoldo.

Maybox/Cineworld

On 6 November 1987 a ten screen multiplex called the Maybox opened in Slough High Street. The project cost £3½ million pounds and Michael Caine performed the opening ceremony. In a newspaper article one of the company’s executives was quoted as saying “we want to create cinemas of the 1980’s instead of the 1930’s.” By 1987 the only cinema left in Slough was the Granada and this comment was to become significant within a very short space of time.

The Maybox has had a series of other names including the Gallery, Cannon, MGM, Virgin, UGC, and now Cineworld.

The Sunset Years

It is always best to spend most of an article describing the glory years of cinemas but, for completeness sake, the decline must also be recorded.

The Century cinema closed at the end of January 1957. It was demolished shortly afterwards. Waitrose supermarket was built on the site. Opening in September 1959 it is now part of a shopping complex.

On 12 March 1965 the Essoldo closed after a performance of South Pacific. Perhaps the splendour of the final film added to the poignancy of the occasion. It became a bingo hall but was demolished a few years later for development.

The Ambassador closed on 10 February 1968. It went over to bingo but was demolished in May 1984. A MFI superstore was constructed on the site and this later became a lighting store.

The Adelphi closed on 21 January 1973, rather unusually a Sunday. In the following May it went over to bingo still run by the Granada Company. The local authority hoped that the old ballroom might be converted into a small cinema at the time the Granada was tripled but this plan did not see the light of day. After conversion to bingo live shows still featured with the Swingin' Blue Jeans, Chas 'n' Dave and The Bachelors appearing in the 1970's

The Adelphi is the only one of the old cinema buildings standing in the town, it is now run by Gala Bingo.

The closure of the Granada was very sudden. Following the opening of the Maybox ten screen multiplex on 6 November 1987 the lights of the Granada went out on Thursday 19 November – thirteen days later. They were never to come on again. The final films were A Nightmare on Elm Street Part 3 (screen 1), The Witches of Eastwick (2) and Rita, Sue and Bob too (3). All were 18 rated.

It seemed Granada felt it would not be able to compete against the Maybox and decided to cut possible losses. The closure was not announced, workmen boarded up the cinema the next day. Local press was advertising the films for the following week and the cinema had announced its Christmas attractions. Patrons and staff were also looking forward to celebrating the Golden Jubilee of the cinema in March 1988.

Given that peremptory closure, and the fact that 18-certificate films were showing on the last day, few loyal patrons were able to make a final visit to the cinema.

The Granada was demolished in early 1988. An office block now occupies the site.

An album of organ music was recorded a few hours before the cinema organ was removed. It eventually found its way to a private residence in Market Rasen.

Slough Council stored slabs from the Pavement of Fame. They are not on public display though some have been restored. A couple of seats from the Granada are on display in Slough Museum.

The large cinema chandelier was stored in the open air and was vandalised.

In September 2005 Slough Council opened the West Wing Arts Centre. The auditorium is a former school hall and art house films are shown there one evening each week.

Some Closing Observations

- ~ With regard to the ABC at Windsor this cinema, in Thames Street, closed in early 1983 after a showing of ET. It opened on Boxing Day 1928 as the Playhouse seating about 1500 patrons. It later became the ABC. Ownership changed in November 1982 and the ABC was renamed the Carousel for the last couple of months of its existence. An arts centre in Windsor shows occasional films thus keeping alive the tradition of public film screenings in the town. The Theatre Royal is still open.
- ~ The Metropole at Victoria Station closed in the summer of 1977. Other entertainments later featured there.
- ~ There was also a Pavement of Fame at the Windmill Theatre in Great Yarmouth but it is no longer extant.
- ~ On leasing the Adelphi in 1953 the Granada Company acquired the only ballroom on its circuit.
- ~ The cinema listings for the week before Easter in 1951 shows that all the cinemas of Slough and Windsor closed on Good Friday. The Century was offering reduced prices for pensioners upon production of their pension books. The listings also show café restaurants attached to the Granada, Century, Adelphi and Essoldo cinemas. Saturday morning children's matinees were running at the Ambassador at Slough and the Playhouse (later ABC) at Windsor.
- ~ I do recall that in 1966 the films at the (then) three Slough cinemas had started to run Friday for seven days for a trial period. This was nearly 20 years before national programmes changed to this arrangement. When I visited in 1967 the trial had been abandoned.
- ~ The situation now in Slough is that filmgoers have a wide range of choice at the town's multiplex Cineworld. The Adelphi still stands as a bingo hall and club members can admire the internal décor, an obvious reminder of its cinema days.

For those who dislike bingo, or are too young to join the club, they can admire the building from the outside. Let us hope it remains a reminder of the days when the Adelphi and her sisters were the proud providers of public entertainment in the town.