



CYMDEITHAS HANES CWM DULAIS CWM DULAIS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter – Cylchlythyr

June 2022

Hello everyone - Helo pawb

Firstly, I must thank all involved with the Community Exhibition held at Seven Sisters Hall. The exhibit covered the whole Valley from Banwen down to Aberdulais and illustrated some of the huge amount of information regarding sites and people which is preserved by the Society. It was well attended over the week by locals and some visitors from further afield. Norman Burns, Eifion Williams and Irene Fearnside particularly are to be thanked for assisting in the organisation set-up and manning of the presentation. Also, special thanks must go to Carol the Centre Manager who provided the space and facilities and even more importantly the tea, coffee and biscuits for all. Carol has also agreed that the Society can store its display boards in the Centre which is a great start to our search for space in which to retain and deposit our “belongings” in the form of equipment and archive materials.

NOTICE ~ ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING ~ 2.15pm JULY 14th, 2022

Cwm Dulais Historical Society
Cymdeithas Hanes Cwm Dulais
Conserving the Heritage of the Dulais Valley

Notice of Annual General Meeting
July 14th 2022
2.15pm

Please remember:
Afternoon meeting time
All members are welcome and encouraged to attend to express their views and support for the Society.

During the season meetings are normally held on the **second Thursday of each month** at
The Music Centre/Band Room
Station Terrace, Seven Sisters **SA10 9DH**
Meetings start 2.15pm (doors open 2pm)

Programme:
July 14th Annual General Meeting
Summer break
New season starts **September 8th 2022**

Members Old & New ~ All Welcome
www.cwmdulais.org.uk
Dulais Valley Historical Society

Please note: - The new date and time for the **Annual General Meeting** is **July 14th, 2022**, at **2.15pm** at the Band Room, Seven Sisters.

All members Old and New are welcome to attend.

This is an opportunity following the Pandemic for the Society to revive and rebuild anew. Anyone with interest in the Dulais Valley community its history and future is encouraged to come along.

Details of the Agenda will follow.

Can I ask if you know of anyone interested who would like to receive Society information to send their email address to myself at t.fearnside@yahoo.co.uk

We are also trying to expand the Facebook site - help is needed to keep us on track.

Editor's note: At our last meeting we were very fortunate to hear a talk from **Ken Thomas** relating his memories of work in the cinema business. I am very pleased to say that he has since provided a written version of the story, Parts one and two follow below with a further section ready for the next edition of the Newsletter.

The Death of an Icon

Part 1 ~ The Plaza: the early years.

Written and contributed by Kenneth Thomas



Figure 1 Plaza Cinema, Swansea – looking West

The Plaza was opened on the 14th of February 1931, showing **Paul Whiteman** in *“King of Jazz”*.

It was installed with a Christie 3 Manual/10 Rank cinema organ.

Until changes were made to cinema fire regulations, it had just short of 4000 seats. These changes introduced in the late 50's, required that there should be one unit door (recognised as 3 feet for a single door, and two units 6 feet for a double door) for every 200 patrons. To accommodate this ruling many seats had to be removed mostly from the stalls. Corridors leading from the doors had to maintain that width to the outside world and could

not merge to cause a bottleneck. This left the cinema with only 3200 seats but despite this, **The Plaza** remained the largest cinema in Wales, and the 3rd largest in the U.K., and represented a capacity that was twice the size of most provincial cinemas.

People queued six deep for 100 yards or more to get in to the cinema, and a frequent view was of fleets of buses parked on the Kingsway. Shops along the front included Stride the jewellers. When you walked into the foyer, you were astonished by a very elegant hallway, terrazzo floored, and Art deco designed, with an 8-foot wide curved staircase with marble balustrades covered by red short-cropped Wilton carpet leading to the balcony level. On that balcony was a cafe and a corridor leading across the whole width of the cinema. It contained discreet alcoves, with a three-piece suite in each, dimly lit, and used as waiting areas for the next showings.

On entering the auditorium, your attention was drawn to the cinema organ; two lit gnomes in the alcoves either side of the proscenium arch and the superb Austrian style curtain. When the film was to start, the organ would descend into its pit, still playing, until the film started. The curtain, or tabs as they were known in cinema terms, would stay down lit by a soft floodlight. House lights would be dimmed very slowly to allow viewers' eyes to adjust.

The **British Board of Film Censors** certificate would be thrown (projected) onto the curtain, which would rise to expose the screen to the **Rank** gong, or the **MGM** lion. At this point the organ would fade away. The timing was perfected between the organist and the projectionist, such that the last note of the tune would disappear just a second or so before the film sound started, like the roar of the lion. This kind of presentation was used at most cinemas of the time. This system reflected exactly how the Odeon Cinema Crewe operated during the two years that I was a projectionist there. However, we used records for the music. Regrettably, all of this is now gone... wham, bam, thank you mam is all too common now!

The Plaza was the first cinema in the U.K. to be fitted with Cinemascope and stereophonic sound, this would have been in preparation for the epic film *“The Robe”*, which was released in 1953. New projectors had to be fitted which could accommodate a magnetic sound head as well as an optical

sound head. The preference was to use the **Rank** option [rather than] **Gaumont** designed projectors labelled Kalee21's from 1948 but known as GK21's. (Author's Note: While Figure 2 does depict examples of the projectors as a working projection box, *it is much too untidy!* It probably depicts one being commissioned, or where dismantling is in progress, as essential aspects such as ducting are missing on the lantern chimneys, and "loose cables" litter the floor.)

The company known as Kalee, was formed and owner by Abram Kershaw of Leeds, and the title is formed by the owner's initials in reverse, followed by the first three letters of Leeds. The company was formed in 1911, and in 1943 was acquired by the **Rank Organisation**. It continued its operations until 1958, when it ceased manufacture, but by then, these projectors were in use virtually throughout the **Rank** cinema chain. They were replaced by the arrival of 70mm films in the 60's, with Italian "Cinemeccanica Victoria 8" projectors, being fitted in **Rank** cinemas. These were dual gauge, able to show both 35mm and 70mm films, and were from new fitted with both optical and magnetic sound heads, and anamorphic lenses in turret operation.

Regulations at the time insisted that double manning of projection rooms, or boxes, was observed at all operational times. As films were show continuously, starting just after lunch and running till 10 o'clock, three full showings took place every day necessitating a team of projectionists. Top man was called "Chief", and the others ranked as assistants, down to trainee. In the 1960's, four projectionists worked at **The Plaza**, sharing shifts to cover the hours. Chief was **Ted Hopkins**, who I got to know very well, a perfectionist in every way possible. He used binoculars to check screen focus, he polished his projectors with car polish to such an extent that he had to have a car sprayer to repaint the coach lines on the projectors! In addition, he hoovered out the lanterns for every reel to take out the ash and insisted that his assistants did the same when he was not on shift.



Figure 2 Example projectors

Running a projection room was not without danger. To start with, it was equipped with three phase mains electricity which is more dangerous than single phase. The arc lamp needed the feed from rectifiers, to change the current to low voltage and high current, typically 50 volts, and 65 amps. This was done using one of two types of rectifiers, the older ones were mercury vapour rectifiers while the newer were metal rectifiers. I have used both types. They were a first cousin of welding rectifiers and produced a vivid white light. Looking into this light could cause severe eye damage, and in extreme cases blindness; it called solar retinopathy, similar to "Arc Eye", as suffered by looking into a welding light. There was a glass pane, like that on a welder's visor, mounted to the lantern door, and a lens system to throw an image onto to an indicator card giving the projectionist a guide to the correct arc position. The projectionist also had to be careful of the rotating sprockets with extra sharp teeth and was always encouraged to close all projector doors when in operation.

The Plaza was fitted with an automatic system called "Projectomatic". It was triggered by silver foil being stuck to the edge of the film adjacent to the changeover cue marks on the film, and each impulse from these foils fed a process pre-programmed into a round drum by pegs, thereby making that process happen without human intervention. I never used this kind of system; it was an attempt to take the load off projectionists which I found unnecessary.... but I never worked a nine-hour day. **The Plaza** did very well in the 50's, but as the 60's approached, cinema attendance was diminishing. More about this in Part 2.

Part 2 ~ The Plaza: It's demise

Written and contributed by Kenneth Thomas

The most significant component in the demise of **The Plaza** cinema, Swansea, was indeed its size, an enormous building, very difficult to heat, and especially in a climate of dwindling attendances. Rather surprisingly, its size *nearly* became its salvation, if it was not for bloody mindedness.... more about that later. The picture below gives some idea of how big this cinema was dominating the street front in Swansea.



Figure 3 The Plaza Cinema, Swansea – Looking East

thus, in the main, other Swansea cinemas drew the public.

The diminishing attendance problem hit every cinema, but one of this size even more so. There were days when the first showings were to an empty cinema, with final showings of barely 5% attendance. Other Swansea cinemas at around a quarter of the size of **The Plaza** fared much better. The **Albert Hall** in Craddock Street only had about 800 seats and was a very intimate cinema. It outlived **The Plaza** by nearly two decades.

The owner of **The Plaza** will not be well remembered for its management in the final years. The cinema was allowed to run down, older films were booked, the staff was not well presented, and

At this point, it is necessary to explain how films were booked, and how this even influenced the situation at all. Most of the public would believe that films were hired out for a fixed price, a bit like a video hire shop. This has never been the case. Films have always been “loaned” to cinemas for a percentage of the ticket sales, and some of the terms have been “at best” crippling. There used to be a bit of a war as to which cinema got which films.

There are two distribution networks. They form the two “splits” from which cinemas take their films. These are the **Rank** split and the **ABC** split. **Rank** handled **Fox, United Artists, Disney, M.G.M,** and their own **Rank** films. The **ABC** split handled the rest, including **Universal, Warner, R.K.O,** and **Hammer**. Film releases were either “General Release”, or were declared “blockbuster” release, also nicknamed “Hard Ticket” films.

The cost of taking a new “blockbuster”, or “Hard Ticket” picture was to say the least, prohibitive. The cinema would have to agree to pay the film company 80% of all ticket money taken. In addition, for some films, a “holdover” clause was included whereby the cinema would also be obliged to keep showing that film until their ticket sales fell to 75% of norm. That situation assumed that 20% of a 25% reduced footfall would still be enough to cover operating costs but in many cases, it was not. The **Lyric** cinema in **Carmarthen** agreed to these terms to obtain the “**Sound of Music**” - it bankrupted the business, forcing its closure. Most films released under “General Release” terms, could start at 80%, but that percentage fell for each week by 10%, until it got to 50%.

Cinemas, such as the one I worked at in the 60's, were Welfare Halls, paid for out of the Miners' penny and tuppenny funds. A special dispensation was given to these cinemas allowing them a band lower than whatever was the current rate, meaning a drop of 10% on the scale.

One such, the **Public Hall, Brynaman** (now known as **Brynaman Cinema**) has never shown the “**Sound of Music**”, due to the terms demanded at the time. These days, it has agreed to pay a little more, and will now show films (when it reopens after the lockdown) that are new releases.

Back to **The Plaza** - it could not afford the newer films or most of the terms imposed and consequently waited for the costs to drop. This meant that it became uncompetitive. Patrons went to other cinemas in **Swansea** of which there were plenty. The owner was approaching ruin: the only option was to sell the cinema and avoid such impositions. I am not quite sure of the date of sale, but

it was bought by the **Rank Organisation**. Sighs of relief were very short lived. **Rank** soon made it clear that their intention was to tear down the cinema and replace it with another half its size. They applied to the **Swansea Town Council** (it was not a city then) for planning permission to do just that. The Council rejected the application. **Rank** appealed only to be rejected again. As they had no intention of being beaten having just spent an enormous amount of money - they appealed to the **Welsh Office**... and waited... and waited.

The organisation then decided to run the cinema in a **Gaumont** style. They spruced the place up, put staff in quality uniforms, re-equipped the cafe and sales kiosks and more importantly, started to use it as a mid-city cinema, showing all the new releases. It became an unqualified success. **The Plaza** became its top grossing cinema, even beating the **Odeon in Leicester Square** - hardly surprising as it was twice the size! **Rank** began to have second thoughts about tearing it down. They approached the **Welsh Office** to ask them to set aside the appeal, but the **Welsh Office** did not. In fact, the appeal was eventually granted, and **Rank** were given permission to instigate the plans whenever they wished! The company then turned to the **Town Council** for support as they had originally not wanted this development. The Council rejected this approach threatening breach of promise action against the **Rank Organisation**. It appears that this was a spiteful attitude taken by the council for not having been listened to in the first place. By now, town councillors had apparently warmed to the plan which was quite sumptuous. I will return to and talk about this plan in the next part of my story. As I mentioned earlier, the size very nearly became its salvation, but the political climate was not in favour. Although **Rank** had run this cinema until about 1964 and proved that it could be profitable, all their revised arguments failed, and the cinema was scheduled for demolition. The last film shown in **the Plaza** was **Peter Sellers** in "**A Shot in the Dark**".

On the final Saturday, I felt that I would visit **Ted** [Hopkins], even if it was for commiserations, but completely underestimated the mood. I entered the projection room shortly before the changeover to the final reel. Ted was upset, especially as there were men in that room waiting to dismantle the projectors! They started the process as soon as the changeover was made and the last reel was left to run! Ted burst into tears, and I very nearly did as well. I left, not to be more embarrassment to him. In the following weeks, the cinema was demolished. I still feel a deep emotion while writing this, all these years later. Ted got a job as a projectionist at the cinema in **Llanelli** that became the **Entertainment Centre**. I popped down to see him, the film was the "**Ipcress File**". He was now reconciled with what was happening and knew that he would return to the new cinema in Swansea. I detected that he was accepting a new beginning. He had worked at **The Plaza** all his working life, with the only exception being during active service in **World War 2**. I would see Ted many more times at the new cinema, but that will be in the next part of my story.

Many years later I met one of the Town Councillors involved. We were in-patients for about one week in a local hospital and discussed this issue several times. Some considerable remorse was expressed as to how the situation was handled and its outcomes.

Notes/ sources

Figure 1 Plaza Cinema, Swansea

https://apis.mail.aol.com/ws/v3/mailboxes/@id==VjN-3c02n9C3fC7trqNYv_Oy8QrIX7E96rXqXM5gAQ6BMtU6bqH-Vr62rSLfrlJrmYPiyqtsdt-iko-uK0ko8KHOrw/messages/@id==AILHStBN41GOYoNk3wtKollrRy8/content/parts/@id==2/thumbnail?appid=aolwebmail&downloadWhenThumbnailFails=true&pid=2

Figure 2 Example projectors

https://apis.mail.aol.com/ws/v3/mailboxes/@id==VjN-3c02n9C3fC7trqNYv_Oy8QrIX7E96rXqXM5gAQ6BMtU6bqH-Vr62rSLfrlJrmYPiyqtsdt-ikouK0ko8KHOrw/messages/@id==AILHStBN41GOYoNk3wtKollrRy8/content/parts/@id==3/thumbnail?appid=aolwebmail&downloadWhenThumbnailFails=true&pid=3

Figure 3 The Plaza Cinema, Kingsway, Swansea

https://apis.mail.aol.com/ws/v3/mailboxes/@id==VjN-3c02n9C3fC7trqNYv_Oy8QrIX7E96rXqXM5gAQ6BMtU6bqH-Vr62rSLfrlJrmYPiyqtsdt-iko-uK0ko8KHOrw/messages/@id==AE68htR_G0h_YoNmYQDmeDXWAZA/content/parts/@id==2/thumbnail?appid=aolwebmail&downloadWhenThumbnailFails=true&pid=2

Western Front Association email

I received this email recently from the Western Front Association and copy the information for interest of Members.

I'm writing to introduce the Wales (South) Branch of the Western Front Association which I believe may be of interest to some of your members.

The branch is 40 years old this year and like many similar organisations, we are slowly but surely recovering from the difficult last two years we have all been through.

The branch meets at the Canton Rugby Football Club, Lawrenny Ave, Cardiff CF11 8BR.

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The branch was responsible for the creation of the famous Dragon memorial at Mametz, in France, and still take an active role in its maintenance.

Details of forthcoming meetings can be found either on our Facebook

Page. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2017117855083779>

or our page on the Western Front Website.

<https://www.westernfrontassociation.com/branches/united-kingdom/wales-south/>

If you would like to know more, or you would like to be added to our mailing list to receive links to talks etc. please feel free to get in touch.

Regards,

Tim Colman (Branch Secretary)

wfasmouthwales@gmail.com

Below is a link to the full letter.

<https://apis.mail.yahoo.com/ws/v3/mailboxes/@.id==VjN-qlsfsFL2qxZKzQAIExEZQ2FfejYaATGOvYU7QfSqdAnliKX3HbKDygSaLyueLhuZca4T9fgtdIJHSy8ip2aJnw/messages/@.id==AM-k6nhY-1CeYrL15AbCeJyxiEE/content/parts/@.id==2/refresh?appid=YMailNodin&ymreqid=6e843c28-be5d-3bbb-1c9b-980000016d00>

Reminder - Please try to attend the AGM - Date 14th July 2pm

Thank you