



CYMDEITHAS HANES CWM DULAIS CWM DULAIS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter – Cylchlythyr

August 2022

Hello everyone - Helo pawb

I hope you are all managing to keep cool and well during this recent heatwave. It was very hot in Aberdulais, but I was told by a resident of Seven that actually it had been snowing there!! Mmm!?! Our best wishes go to two Committee members who have been unwell recently, namely George Evans and Joy Howells both of whom, I am glad to say, are on the mend after hospital treatment.

Our last meeting was of course the AGM held on the 14th of July. The Chairman welcomed members, thanked them for their support and hoped that they were satisfied with the efforts of the Committee to keep the Club active during the pandemic. Unfortunately, there were only seven people present, 6 of whom are Committee members. However, as this number is sufficient for a quorum, it was possible to proceed with the meeting. I will not record the Minutes in this message, suffice to say that we were able to deal with the first few items on the agenda and received reports from current Officers which in general reflected positively on the affairs of the Society. Subscriptions will remain at current level of £10 per member for the Year or £2 per person if attending a single meeting.

The next item was “Election of Officers”. If the meeting was to follow existing Constitutional positions, then 11 posts are currently listed. In fact, several of the important posts are filled by the same person taking two roles. The organisation is becoming extremely reliant on a very few individuals. The Chairman expressed this opinion and subsequently proposed that unless more people could assist with the Committee it was unreasonable to expect the attendees to again fill all roles. It was therefore proposed that the AGM be suspended at this point in the agenda until a future Society meeting when more members could be in attendance. The current officers are prepared to continue until such a time. This motion was seconded and in a ballot was carried with one vote against.

Accordingly, I must announce that the current Committee will continue as now until the Annual General Meeting is resumed in the hope that more views and ideas may be forthcoming.

Our next meeting will be held on the **8th of September 2022** at which there will be a visiting speaker. Following this, on **13th of October 2022**, the meeting will take the form a Members’ Comments and Suggestions Night seeking contributions and ideas from the audience. Part of this meeting will be taken up with the resumed AGM with the hope that a new Committee can be formed. The existing intention is then to continue with the normal visiting speaker programme until December. However, if there are other suggestions or activities sought by members then adjustments can be made to stimulate the Society. I have received several emails during the season from groups such as CADW, NLW and the local Neath Heritage Group with suggestions for research ventures based on local history or community projects encouraging the involvement of local people. In my view this is the way that the Society should be looking in the future – recalling the earlier days of the Society and its activities.

We have become a little stale and reliant on incoming speakers rather than generating our own activities and interests.

The Death of an Icon

Part 3 - The New Build

Written and contributed by Kenneth Thomas

Before I begin Part 3 of my story this may be an opportune moment to explain how I obtained the information that I have already supplied and intend to supply in this section. Information has always flowed from one place to another, in virtually every industry, and the cinema industry is no exception. Additionally, projectionists in the main have partly used their off days in a sort of busman's holiday, visiting one another, and of course, jungle drum type of gossip occurs. Additionally, it is the fact that cinemas were maintained by service engineers working for **Westrex Sound**. The engineer in South West Wales was **Doug Axtel** who would also spread news and information. However, the bulk of material was obtained from the people working for **Rank**, who I was fortunate to meet. The Chief Engineer for the new build, for both the cinema, and the dancehall, was **Dennis Keane**, a Lancastrian, who had been recruited to be the **Rank** engineer for the whole of South Wales. Dennis had been trained by the R.A.F as a radar technician, and then became a Blue Streak missile technician, and then senior sound engineer for **Granada Television** in Manchester. He gave me the details of the original plan when we met, and we got to be good friends. Dennis and his wife became very good friends of myself and my wife so much so that when we got married in 1973, Dennis was my best man.

The new build started in 1965. The original plan, which was not faithfully delivered, was to build an



Figure 1 New Odeon Cinema, Kingsway, Swansea

entertainment centre, with a bowling alley at ground level, a dancehall below, and a cinema above. There was to be a walkway, fully enclosed, to span the Kingsway between ticket office for the cinema, and the 1st floor of the N.C.P. car park across the road. This was intended to house a bar, a restaurant, shops, and a rest area. These would then alleviate the need for these to be accommodated in the cinema itself. There was to be a staircase at the complex side to allow footfall to the bowling alley, and to the dancehall.

None of this happened, there was no such development. The ground level site remained empty for quite a while, but the other two features were built. Tesco eventually occupied the ground level site. Figure 1 shows how this looked a little later.

The plan was for the cinema to be identical to the plan of another **Odeon** being built simultaneously. namely the cinema in St. Martin's Lane, London. Ultimately, Swansea was not built to the same standard as the **Odeon St. Martin's Lane** which was constructed to a superb standard. The dancehall, the **Top Rank Suite**, was built pretty much as the plan had promised. Both were completed in 1966. It was at this time that I got to meet Dennis, introduced by Ted, who had returned as Chief Projectionist, along with **Chris Gould**, the cinema manager, and **Roger Thomas**, the **Top Rank** manger. I was well known in both and as an ex-**Rank Projectionist**, was never made to buy a ticket to enter. There was a cost though; I worked many an evening for no pay at the **Top Rank**, to cover for Dennis, who did suffer poor health – in appreciation, I would be sent home with a bottle of whisky under one arm, and a bottle of brandy under the other. The ultimate reward came when we got married, and were given our reception at the **Top Rank**, for nothing, paying only food cost price. The whole of the staff worked for nothing but joined the reception. Two disk jockeys worked for nothing, **Tony Wyn Jones** the resident DJ, and **Steve Dewitt** of **Swansea Sound**. The reception ran

from 3.00 till midnight, with everybody joining that evening's commercial Thursday dance. (My wife still asserts that we chose Thursday as she didn't want to ruin a perfectly good Saturday).

The **Swansea Odeon** was pretty much built on a shoestring budget. Many of the features that were on the plan were not delivered. The walls of the auditorium were left as block work but sprayed black. There was to be a gold curtain around the whole of the auditorium, but that was not installed. Staircases leading to the cinema pay box floor, and then into the cinema, were intended to be carpeted, but they were not... vinyl flooring was fitted, with aluminium treads. The corridor walls should have been soft plastered, but were left as brick work, and speckle painted. There was a distinct feeling of cheapness. A final insult was that there was no curtain around the screen.... they declared it a "floating" screen - *a new concept*". Later, they did fit a little bit of gold curtain around the screen part only. Some of these aspects can be seen in Figures 2 and 3 when I have explained the other problems experienced due to cheapness.

The sound system was meant to be a **Westrex** six channel sound system, using the tried and tested **Mullard** valve system with valve ECC83 as input valve, and a pair of KT66 valves in push/pull for outputs, delivering 35 watts RMS to each of the six channels. (By now the **Mullard** output valves could be EL34's instead and worked every bit as well). This system was installed in the **Top Rank**, but a cheaper transistorised system delivering 20 watts RMS per channel was fitted to the cinema. However, this did prove adequate. Speaker bins were not installed at the screen, instead they installed five **Goodman** dual cone "Axiums" of about 10-inch diameter, (the sixth channel is surround sound). These also proved adequate, but not typical of cinema sound. The **Brynaman Cinema** that I worked in had speaker bins using 24-inch base and mid-range units, and a horn tweeter to each of the three sound channels.

Cinemeccanica Victoria 8 projectors were fitted in the **Odeon** and being dual gauge 35mm or 70mm were capable of any film ratio, or any sound system. The 70mm films ran at a higher frame rate, 30 frames per second, unlike the 24 frames per second of 35mm films. Sound was six channel magnetic, as well as single channel optical. The frame size increased to five sprocket teeth, unlike the four sprocket teeth of 35mm films. Since a reel of 70mm film was now twice the width [of 40mm] and had a bigger frame size, it was impossible to lift to the projector top spindle. Consequently a winch was provided to lift them to that position! Many cinemas fitted floor mounted spindles and fed the film via a system of pulley wheels.

The cinema opened to the film "*The Sound of Music*", which had completed its run at the **Capitol Cinema**, in Cardiff. This was mid 1966's.

A press showing was carried out, and Doug of **Westrex** sound was in attendance to monitor the system. The event proved to be an embarrassment to **Rank**. The sound echoed around the bare cinema walls to such an extent that sound was kept at "one" watt RMS throughout the showing.

Before the public showing of this film, Rank had a firm in to attach acoustic tiles around the whole of the auditorium, and the spray these black. This cured the echoing, but shortly started to belly away from the walls. Rank bought in another firm to attach cross banding, in a diamond pattern to hold back the tiles. This banding was in stainless steel, and these bought in a different problem.... smokers striking matches would cause severe reflections throughout the cinema and this was considerably complained

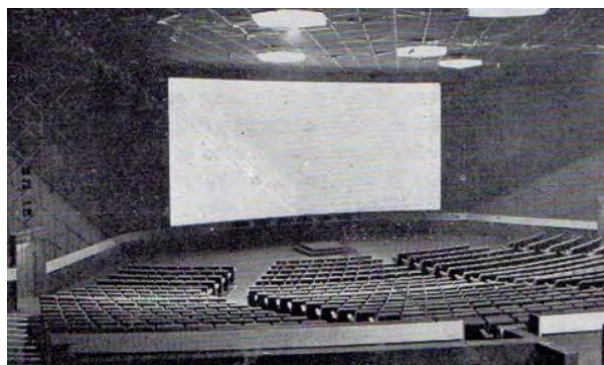


Figure 2 Interior - early plans



Figure 3 Interior - subsequent layout

about yet **Rank** did not respond. Figures 2 and 3 confirm these facts. Figure 2 shows the floating screen, and the walls painted black while Figure 3 shows the screen now curtained and the stainless steel strips. It also shows that they had colour changed the walls and ceiling to match the curtain colour. Note the surround sound speakers either side of the screen. Unlike other cinemas that had surround sound speakers all around the auditorium, they deployed “phase shift” to produce the effects channel from two speaker locations, exactly as some home cinema systems, thereby saving cost.

In 1972, my friend Dennis left the **Top Rank**, to become a pub landlord, and kept the **Criterion** in Oxford Street, later to be renamed the **Eli Jenkins**. He died of his health condition in 1982. Ted retired much about the same time, but he lived until 1997. The last occasion that I had contact with my acquaintances from that site was at Dennis’s funeral at Morriston crematorium. In conclusion to this section of my story, I must mention another friend of mine, **Phil Fripp**, a **Curry’s** television engineer and former **Top Rank** engineer, who also provided invaluable information.

The **Odeon** never ran as successfully as had been hoped, it continued to languish with falling attendances. It became obvious that even a cinema of 1400 seats was too big for a provincial town, or city. In 1982, **UCI** opened a multi-screen cinema in **Park Tawe**, and this took away even more of the **Odeon’s** patronage. They were forced to follow the trend towards the multi-screen system. **Rank** attempted to convert the **Odeon** to a triple screen complex by creating two smaller pods utilising the top left, and top right, of the circle area. This area was not well defined, as the auditorium was built as a stadium style accessed from an entry mid-point up the slope. Toilets at top left and top right were taken to become new projection boxes, and the style of projection had to change as the conventional twin projector system could not be run with only one man present which had become the norm as fire regulations had changed. The **St. Martin’s Lane Odeon** was suffering a similar drop in audience figures, but later found support as an LGBT cinema supporting the gay community.

The **Odeon** had to install a system as used in all multi-screen complexes for each of its screens namely “*cake stand projector systems*”. Only one projector was now needed for each cinema. With this, all the reels of film comprising the whole show, were joined together on one plate of the cake stand and fed to the projector by a series of pulleys. It then returned to another level of the cake stand by a further series of pulleys. The arc lamp was replaced with a Xenon bulb lantern, requiring little attention. One man could run a series of these systems if showings were staggered to allow him to be in different places at the appropriate times. As projectors subsequently became much smaller (about the size of a small under counter fridge) then top and bottom film spool boxes could be removed more easily.

However, even this was not enough to solve the problem; patrons were drifting to the **UCI** complex. In 1989, **Rank** bought out the **UCI** complex, and the cinema in the Kingsway was converted into nightclubs, “**Oceana**”, and “**Jumpin Jak**”, both were **Rank** measures. Patrons were still deserting the site in favour of **Park Tawe** and **Wind Street** venues, and this site was now becoming unprofitable. The new **Odeon** was now at **Park Tawe**.

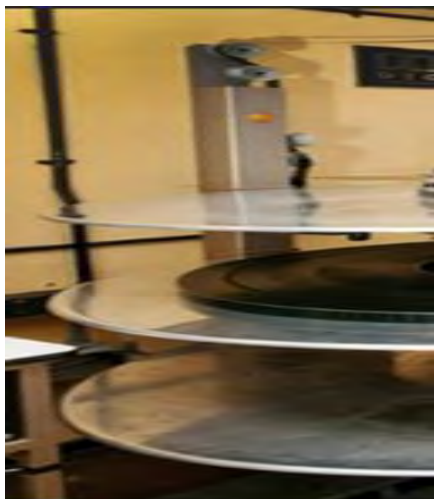


Figure 4 “*Cake stand system*”

Cinemas everywhere were soon to convert to digital presentations, when films were delivered by an external hard drive of about 6Tb size, securely transported in an aluminium case. This would be connected by a megabit cable to the digital projector, which had a memory of equal size. The whole presentation would be queued up on a visual display, and merely had to be started, and then left to run. Eventually, even this became obsolete; films could be downloaded, with no need for any transportation. Some cinemas had owned such a system in the past, perhaps not as modern as this, that would allow presentation of boxing matches.

These were downloaded via high bandwidth telephone lines.

During its lifetime there was one death in the cinema complex. On 3rd May 1972 (I had to look up the date and the name of the man and his group) a visiting band "**Stone the Crows**" arrived with just minutes to set up before their allotted show time. Their singer and guitarist, **Les Harvey** reached to pick up his microphone whilst holding his guitar in his other. He immediately collapsed to the floor! Newspaper reports claimed that he was electrocuted because his microphone was not earthed, and because he was standing in a pool of water - good old British press... "*never let the truth get in the way of a good story*"! There certainly was no pool of water, and if the microphone earth had not been earth connected... he would have lived.

A capacity crowd of 1400 people were evacuated, but an off-duty doctor did try to resuscitate the man but was unsuccessful. Independent sound engineer **John Ham**, who had a shop in Mansel Street, was called in by the Police to investigate. His report which was also supplied to the Inquest declared that the fault lay with an incorrectly wired 13amp mains plug for the amplifier, where the earth lead had been left not connected to the earth pin. This had wandered around the inside of the plug, until it touched the fuse cap, thereby sending a lethal electrical impulse up the screening of the microphone cable, and to the microphone casing. This practice was widespread with groups, as a slightly poor amplifier, or badly laid cabling, could put a mains "*hum*" into the sound.

The measures that followed were that: -

- all equipment bought in to any **Rank** premises had to be checked by the house engineer,
- all groups had to arrive in good time for the above to happen, and
- all stage electrical supplies were fitted with Edward Thompson breakers. These would monitor current flow via the live lead, the return current via the neutral lead, and detect earth leakage. They were claimed to work in 1/200th of second which meant that anyone touching a live cable would not be electrocuted. (Nobody came forward to test this statement).

Both buildings rather languished through much of the 21st century, and in 2015/2016 were scheduled for demolition. This was done in the early part of this year, 2020, bringing me to the point where I could now be writing... *The Death of a Second Icon*. All that now remains is a hole in the ground surrounded by contractor's fencing.

The green skip and the pile of yellow pallets to the left in Figure 5 are in the area where the stage was located on the lower of two floor levels. We will all have to wait to see what Swansea Council will allow to be built there. I must confess that I do not have a great deal of faith in them following their two recent Kingsway developments, especially that for the bendy bus. Apologies for this being so long, I have only touched the surface of the subject and there is much more to tell, however, I hope that this has been interesting to you,



Figure 5 Cleared site of former Odeon complex

Notes/ sources

Figure 1 New Odeon Cinema, Kingsway, Swansea

https://apis.mail.aol.com/ws/v3/mailboxes/@.id==VjN-3c02n9C3fC7trqNYv_Oy8QrIX7E96rXqXM5gAQ6BMtU6bqH-Vr62rSLfrlJrmYPivqtsdt-iko-uk0ko8KHOrw/messages/@.id==ALWQcZwjYY8hYoNoxwmc8HIVzCU/content/parts/@.id==2/thumbnail?appid=aolwebmail&downloadWhenThumbnailFails=true&pid=2

Figure 2 Interior - early plans

https://apis.mail.aol.com/ws/v3/mailboxes/@.id==VjN-3c02n9C3fC7trqNYv_Oy8QrIX7E96rXqXM5gAQ6BMtU6bqH-Vr62rSLfrlJrmYPivqtsdt-iko-uk0ko8KHOrw/messages/@.id==ALWQcZwjYY8hYoNoxwmc8HIVzCU/content/parts/@.id==3/thumbnail?appid=aolwebmail&downloadWhenThumbnailFails=true&pid=3

Figure 3 Interior - subsequent layout

https://apis.mail.aol.com/ws/v3/mailboxes/@.id==VjN-3c02n9C3fC7trqNYv_Oy8QrIX7E96rXqXM5gAQ6BMtU6bgH-Vr62rSLfrlJrmYPiyqtsdt-jko-uk0ko8KHOrw/messages/@.id==ALWQcZwjYY8hYoNoxwmc8HIVzCU/content/parts/@.id==4/thumbnail?appid=aolwebmail&downloadWhenThumbnailFails=true&pid=4

Figure 4 "Cake stand" system

https://apis.mail.aol.com/ws/v3/mailboxes/@.id==VjN-3c02n9C3fC7trqNYv_Oy8QrIX7E96rXqXM5gAQ6BMtU6bgH-Vr62rSLfrlJrmYPiyqtsdt-jko-uk0ko8KHOrw/messages/@.id==ALWQcZwjYY8hYoNoxwmc8HIVzCU/content/parts/@.id==5/thumbnail?appid=aolwebmail&downloadWhenThumbnailFails=true&pid=5

Figure 6 Cleared construction site

https://apis.mail.aol.com/ws/v3/mailboxes/@.id==VjN-3c02n9C3fC7trqNYv_Oy8QrIX7E96rXqXM5gAQ6BMtU6bgH-Vr62rSLfrlJrmYPiyqtsdt-jko-uk0ko8KHOrw/messages/@.id==ALWQcZwjYY8hYoNoxwmc8HIVzCU/content/parts/@.id==6/thumbnail?appid=aolwebmail&downloadWhenThumbnailFails=true&pid=6

Our thanks once again go to Ken for his remembrances of an icon of the Swansea scene now sadly gone. As Editor, I must just note that opinions expressed are entirely those of the author.

The Committee look forward to seeing everyone again on **8th of September 2022** and please do spread the word of the Society to friends and neighbours.

Enjoy the remainder of the Summer