

## A Walk Down Memory Lane – Billy McCullagh 9<sup>th</sup> October 2019

The speaker was Billy McCullagh who in addition to providing a brief history of moving pictures took the audience on a nostalgic walk down memory lane recalling the golden days of cinema in and around Belfast. The 19<sup>th</sup> century had been a great period of technology with inventions such as steam, railways, internal combustion engine, electricity, telephone, telegram, photography, capture of sound on cylinders and the gramophone, one thing that was missing was the means of making and projection of moving images.

Around 1890, George Eastman was credited with developing celluloid film that could capture black and white images. Not long afterwards Thomas Edison invented the Kinetoscope which was a crude device that displayed moving images that could be seen through a viewer by just one person at a time. Edison made a fundamental mistake by only patenting his device in the United States. In France, the Lumiere brothers used Edison's invention as the basis for their Cinematograph that was portable, could take photographs, develop and then project them onto a wall or screen, being astute businessmen they were soon producing short films that could be shown by licenced operators around the world.



Cinematograph

At the time there were no cinemas as such, variety theatres began showing short films in between acts and in 1896 the Empire Theatre in Victoria Square with several others introduced this new form of entertainment to Belfast. Two of the earliest films that were circulated were 'The Arrival of a Train' and 'Watering the Garden' both of which were shown at the Empire. It should be remembered that most people at the time had never seen a moving picture so the train that was arriving appeared as if it was coming out of the screen occasionally causing some of the audience to scream and run out.



The Arrival of a Train



The Alhambra

One of the first picture houses was the Alhambra, North Street that opened in 1902 with seating on wooden benches. Captions told the story; a pianist or group of musicians provided an accompaniment. Many people at the time did not have the benefit of a full time education, they had to work half time in the factories and attend school half time, it was common for groups visiting cinemas to bring a person along that could read the captions to them.

In 1929 the Picture House in Royal Avenue was the first in Belfast to feature a moving picture with sound, Al Jolson sang 3 songs that had been dubbed into the film. Progress with sound was rapid and it was not long before feature films were widely available, some of the stars of the silent movies were unable to make the transition to sound.

Many cinemas were constructed to a standardised design that incorporated 3 or 4 attached shops.

Some operators could not afford a weekly change of film and income from the shop rentals and sales was vital to them staying in business.



The Tonic, Bangor  
incorporated 4 shops

There were approximately 50 cinemas in and around Belfast by 1950, most showed a main feature film, a shorter film or cartoon, Pathe News, trailers and advertisements. A few featured a rising organ that was played during the interval, a choice of seating from basic to comfortable, usherettes would walk up and down the aisles during the interval selling tubs of ice cream with small wooden spoons and soft drinks.

By 1970 the growth and impact of television was such that the popularity of the traditional cinema had declined making way for the multi-screen complexes that we are familiar with today.



**Astoria, Ballyhackamore**



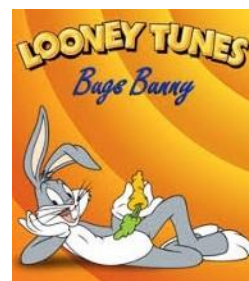
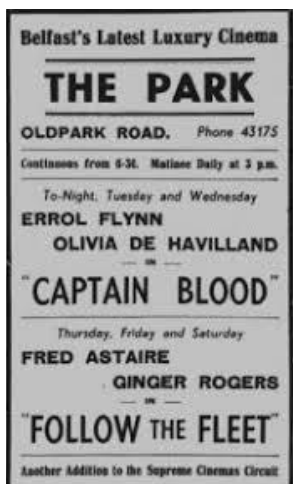
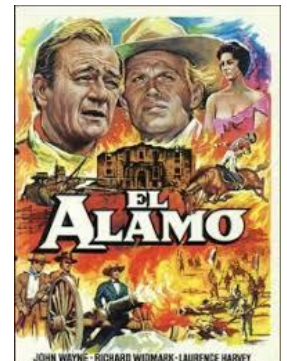
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