
Disclaimer: This document was written in 1995 and concerns memories of 1930s life; as such there may be opinions expressed or words used that do not meet today's norms and expectations.

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Saturday 11th February

Ray Rochford,
[redacted],
[redacted], Eccles,
Salford,
Manchester, M30 [redacted]

I was born and bred in the largest concentration of slums in Europe, namely, "Hankey Park", once written about by "Love on the Dole" author Walter Greenwood, "Hanky Park" was an ironic misnomer of Hankinson St which dissected the conglomeration of squalid hovels from top to bottom.

There were numerous dilapidated buildings masquerading as cinemas clotted all over our area, which of course were dangerous fire traps with only one entrance, now wherever the cinema was situated the population from the surrounding streets virtually "adopted" this cinema as their own. If ever you wanted to find someone quickly you just went to the cinema they frequented! This covetous nature was especially strong if the cinema was rather small, it was "their" "picture place" and no way was they going to have strangers occupying seats which territorially belonged to them. Now this phenomenon was quite common place in Salford. During the late twenties and early thirties, whole families used to take over and monopolise "their" cinema at the top of the street, and woe betide any strangers that inadvertently sat in their rows of seats.

As a young boy I used to visit on the kerb and watch the nightly migration to the cinema, first up the lane as usual would be Mrs Braddock with her tribe of nine children, then next would be Mrs Burke with her eleven children, walking alongside of her would be of course Mrs Horrigan with her brood of nine children and bringing up the rear would be Mrs McDonald with her “small” family of five, the majority of these children would get in free, or “else”. Each of these mothers would be carrying their own “refreshments” in wickerwork cane baskets usually consisting of “dripping butties”, faded apples, and home made ginger beer, all of which was consumed during the film, much to the annoyance of the patrons sat near them, but they kept stum [quiet]!

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Irrespective of whatever was showing at their local cinema they would dutifully trudge up the lane to watch whatever was on. They wouldn't even contemplate going to another cinema just a few streets away. That, to them, would be utterly disloyal. Besides that, if the film was lousy they could have a good gossip & natter. When they built the Broadway in nineteen thirty three it was the first modern cinema to be erected in Salford. It certainly was an imposing edifice of mock marble with Corinthian columns either side of the imposing entrance. I vividly remember when Noel Coward's Cavalcade was featured they had two ex-servicemen dressed in full guardsman's uniforms including busby and wooden sentry boxes, marching up and down stamping their feet, presenting arms, the full monty: all for five bob a night in the pouring rain, poor sods.

The manager of this luxuriant cinema was a certain Mr Clayton Knutt (I assure you I haven't made this name up, you can check the A. B. C's record of employees from the thirties). Now this Mr Clayton Knutt was a Dickensian character if ever there was one, believe me! What an obsequious, oleaginous Uriah Heep of a manager, bowing and scraping to all the middle class patrons entering “his” foyer, his beady little black eyes darting all over his domain, and when he spotted someone in overalls or a shabbily clothed wretch actually walking through the ornate glass doors onto his red and gold plush carpet his face would go puce. Quickly summoning a uniformed commissioner, he'd have the miscreant rapidly ejected, by George! He would!

The side door in Queen Victoria St was where the hoi polloi used to queue up, where it was three pence for children and sixpence for adults. When you entered from the side door you could only sit in the seats allocated, usually the first fifteen to twenty rows. There would be an usherette stationed behind a brass chain across the end row of working class seats and the beginning of the dearer posh seats. The only time the chain was removed was for the ice-cream attendant started her perambulations, South Africa wasn't the only place that practiced apartheid!! I recall the tall

lugubrious fireman coming down along the rows of seats (only where we were seated) and spraying us like pigs that had swine fever.

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As a child I thought it was wonderful that they should douse us with perfume, I quite liked the smell of droplets that fell on my head and face, little did I know then that it was of course Jeye's Fluid. Happy days, I don't think!

When I first attended the cinema around about nineteen twenty nine, some films were half-silent, half-talkies. I can only assume that talkies must have come out half way through making a silent film? Most of the elderly people in Hanky Park couldn't read or write, so when they went to the cinema they would take along a young grandson or granddaughter so that the child could read out the captions that came up during the film. It was quite common to hear maybe twenty five to thirty kids all chanting out loud in unison – "Mary has just been told her husband has been killed in the war", or – "John leaves home to find work in London". Sometimes I think I can still hear those voices! I once was asked by old Tom McKenna if I'd go to the cinema with him to see one of these "half and halves" as we then called them, now I didn't relish this one little bit because old Tom was mutt & jeff, very deaf in fact but when an elder asked you to do something in those distant days, you did it.

Halfway through this film my throat was getting very sore because I was practically shouting at the top of my voice. I was greatly relieved to be slung out onto the cobble stones for spoiling the entertainment of all the other patrons, old Tom sat and watch the whole film though, when I informed my mother what had occurred and why old Tom didn't come out with me? She said - "you daft sod Tom McKenna is the best lip reader in Salford".

I firmly believe that the history of the cinema and the beneficial effect it had on thousands of working class families has never been really explored in great depth. The cinema was in my humble opinion an essential and vital necessity for us to endure the appalling rigours of grinding poverty, without the recourse of our "Dream Palaces" where we could be wrapped into a warm cosy kind etherealization for several hours. Just like a heroin addict that needs a fix, we too needed a fix to keep us going and to stop us going either insane or suicidal with the hopeless agonising conditions

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that we had to endure day after day, month after month, year after year. The cinema was a safety valve of immense importance in those terrible bleak days. We saw beautiful people, in beautiful houses, in beautiful countries and, in some indifineable [sic] way, it gave us a little hope for the future. Without those "dream palaces" to escape to, God only knows what might have happened, violent uprisings, maybe a desperate revolution, who's to say? The cinema may have been a

soporific placebo to thousands and thousands of brutally suppressed working class people but it was absolutely vital for helping us to bear the soul destroying poverty. They were the opium of hope. I say that all this has been overlooked, maybe conveniently by so called historians who didn't need the cinema "fix" that we needed so urgently, anyway very few historians are born the sons of labourers, so how could they have the slightest idea of what we really needed? Historians can make valid comparisons, but they cannot make valid judgements. The latter can only be made by those people who have experienced the conditions first hand, and had to cope with them first hand.

I hope this letter will help you in some little way, and I wish you both every success in your venture. If I can help in anyway whatsoever I will do so gladly.

– May God Bless You Both and keep you safe from Harm. –

– Ray Rochford. –