

## Some recollections of cinema-going

### Caveat

I have read many biographies and biographical recollections, and I am always a little suspicious of total recall. I have distrusted colons, and exclamation marks and other points of English written ten, twenty-fifty years after the event. These notes are no exception. However, they are written in all honesty and to the best of my ability. Accept them for what they are.

P.C.Mitchell.

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I was born on 31 December 1926 in Edge Hill, Liverpool. This was, and is, a working class area, now mostly flattened, thank goodness. The nearest cinema to my home was the *Capitol*, Overbury Street. Within three-quarters of a mile were the following cinemas: the *Coliseum*, Paddington, (street in Edge Hill), the *Playhouse*, Smithdown Road, the *Tunnel*, Tunnel Road. None of these would be called salubrious, but screened the usual menu of films of the Thirties.

I was probably aged about 7 years old when my cousin Gordon took me to the Children's Matinee for the first time at the *Coliseum*, this cinema was very poorly furnished: the front five or six rows being merely fabric covered benches. The admission charge would be about 2d, and during the showing, a uniformed attendant/fireman would walk up and down the aisles discharging a cloying, sweet-smelling disinfectant. I can remember the Flash Gordon serials, also 'The Last of the Mohicans', with Harry Carey and Bob Kohlman (?) and at about that time, a film or serial named 'My Pal the King' starring Tom Mix. Other actors remembered were Buck Jones, Ken Maynard, Johnny Mack Brown.

(An indelicate memory from my first visit to the *Coliseum*. I wanted to go for a 'wee', and started crying. My cousin, impatiently, told me to do it on the floor, - which I did!. When the cinema emptied, there was a sizeable pool of water from other incontinent young cinema-goers!)

Over in Everton was a cinema named the *Lytton*, if you were too poor to pay in money, you could pay with jam-jars.

As I grew older, I went to the cinema quite often, and further afield. The larger cinemas in Liverpool were a must, the films were released a little earlier than those on the outskirts, and were usually linked to certain American studios. The *Majestic* in Crown Street showed mainly Warner Bros output, and in my teens watched Cagney, Bogart, Raft, in many a shoot-out. (A memory has suddenly returned, and that is that I could identify a film production company from the grain of the film, Mongram Pictures, which was an 'El Cheapo' set-up, had a coarse grain, which gave almost black tones; while 20th Century Fox had a fine film stock which offered a full tonal range) When I was about 15 years of age (1942) I went to work at General Film Distributors Ltd, as a film packer. GFD was situated in Camden Street, opposite the old *Trocodero* cinema, in what could be called Liverpool's Wardour Street, within walking distance were about six film distribution companies, (my cousin worked for Warner Brothers) My work entailed loading the film cans into suitably sized steel, wood-lined boxes e.g., 1 reel, 2 reel, up to a container which stood at the height of about 3 feet; this latter was usually for a long feature film. We handled early Abbott and Costello comedies (?), Back Street, etc., and the Gaumont British News reels. The latter proved an interesting and also frustrating job. The manager (Ken Jones) gave me the job of transferring a single newsreel from one cinema to another. In this case the reel had already been delivered by FDS (Film Distribution Services) Ltd, to the *Cabbage Hall* cinema, (yes, that really was its name) near Breck Road. My job was to wait until the newsreel had been projected and packed, and then tear away on my

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bicycle to the *Regal* cinema Utting Avenue, which was about a mile away for projection at a slightly later time. The reel was then collected next day by GFD, but what happened after that I do not know. However, I made it my business to get to the first cinema early and watch the short features and cartoons, and when I got to the second cinema I usually managed to catch most of the 'big picture' as we called it, and then at a later date saw the beginning or ending of films I had partly seen. I was in no way a film buff as we now use that term, but I watched and enjoyed a variety of films which covered murder, love, death, cowboys and Indians, gangsters, financiers, priests and so on. (After typing the latter, I had second thoughts and should say that at time a lot of awful British films were on display.) A little incident from that time. Our manager called us together and ordered us to search the film vaults. It seemed that one of the other distributors had lost a film. This was a Dutch film named 'Crosspatch', and the story was that this was the only copy in England, and had been brought to this country after the German take-over of Holland. We carried out a search but without success. Eventually, larking about, a workmate and I decided to enter the premises of a film distributor who had vacated their premises (Note to researcher--this building was on Commutation Row, but I forget the name of the Company ) We actually climbed down the huge ventilator/chimneys, which were mandatory for the storing of film. On entry to the vaults we had a reconnoitre, and actually found this Dutch film. At this distance in time I am unable to recall our manager's reactions on the find. I often received tickets for Trade Shows, and it was always a pleasure to see a new film in the luxury of the *Paramount* in London Road or the *Forum* in Lime Street.

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In 1938 or 1939 I went to Prestatyn on a school holiday, and at the cinema there (name forgotten) saw *Gunga Din*, I mention this incident and film particularly, because at that time, an American comic magazine which was devoted to films, appeared in the shops, Each page was colour-printed with stills and had 'bubbles' of conversation. As far as I can remember, the print quality of this magazine/comic was reasonably good, and in the particular issue I read, it actually featured the film *Gunga Din* and I took the comic with me to see the film. I remember trying to follow the story line on screen and page. It was a waste of time, for obviously, there were gaps in the action on the page and that on screen.

I bought one or two issues of this magazine but I can no longer recall titles of the films covered.

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On 3 September 1939, I was evacuated to Penrycae, a small village two miles from Ruabon in North Wales. We went to the cinemas at Rhos and Ruabon, The cinema at Rhos was of conventional design, set in a row of shops, not far from the Miners Institute. The only film I remember seeing there was American, titled 'Men of Steel' it was a musical, set in a steelworks!

The cinema at Ruabon was called *The Village Hall*, it was made of corrugated-iron, and seated about one hundred people. I motored past the building about 20 years ago, and it had been converted into a bingo hall, like so many picture-houses. Again, only one film comes to my mind, this was an atrocious British film entitled "The Farmer's Daughter" which starred Nora Swinbourne (is that the right spelling?) There must have been better films, but that one blocks out my memories of the good films.

*The Village Hall* was the weekly meeting place of we evacuees from Liverpool, and we caused a fair amount of annoyance to other cinemagoers, When we had seen the 'first house' and left the cinema, it was a regular practice to bombard the iron roof with stones and pebbles; it made an awful din, and we <sup>were</sup> often pursued by the fireman/attendant.



10-18-78

I was called up for Army service in January 1945. After training and various postings in England, I was posted to Greece, where the civil war was taking place. It was now June 1946. For a time I was in barracks in Salonika. The cinemas there were along the waterfront, and I visited one to see *Cæsar and Cleopatra*. The cinema was quite big. The circle, apart from the usual seating, had a number of private boxes where we could see family, or perhaps business, groups. There was no restriction on the number of cinemagoers, and the aisles were crowded. The shows were continuous and when someone left their seat, there was a wild scramble to obtain a vacant seat or seats.

We were amused to note that as the films were mostly subtitled, the Greek filmgoers carried out voluble conversations with each other whilst their eyes were glued to the screen. The outside walls of the cinemas carried huge posters advertising the current release, and it was strange to see the names of our favourite actors and actresses; Vivien Leigh, Humphrey Bogart, Edward G. Robinson *et al* displayed in the Greek character equivalents.

Some time later we moved north to the small town of Elevationopolis in Macedonia. During my nine month stay there we had two or three visits from the Army Kinema Corps (AKC). Our camp had no suitable building for the showing of films, so the projector was set up on an earthen bank and aimed at a whitewashed wall. On one occasion we were shown a boring film and our attention was distracted by the sight and sound of gunfire, some five or six miles to the west, where the Communists and the Royalists were shelling each other. We had a certain regard for the AKC. The projectionist, usually a one-man band would appear at a camp, having travelled alone in a pick-up truck, with a projector and films, and they would sometimes give a reading of a newspaper review of the film to be shown.

The nearest large town was Kavalla, on the Aegean sea. It had just one cinema —and only one projector. This meant that when the first reel of a feature film was shown, the lights would go up, and there would be a scramble to the bar which had been set up in front of the screen, where we would buy soft drinks or even bottles of cheap Retina and Mavrodaphne.

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Late 1947 and I was in Egypt. Our base at Tel-el-Kebir had an open-air cinema, it showed films occasionally, but I have no recollection of films shown. On a 48 hour leave, I once visited the only cinema in Ismailia, this also was an open-air cinema, which had the advantage of being overlooked by houses and flats, where the inhabitants had a free showing (although silent!). Like the cinema in Kavalla, Greece, there was only one projector, and during the reel change, again, the sales of drinks and Groppi ice-cream. We went to this cinema purely out of curiosity, as the films were mainly in Arabic, and there was no attempt to sub-title them, in any language.