

The Plaza Cinema – North Marine Road, Scarborough
Interview with Harry Groom – projectionist

I was fortunate enough to track down Harry Groom, who worked for many years as a projectionist in many of Scarborough's Cinemas during the second half of the twentieth Century. He informed me that The Hollywood Plaza is one of only a handful of cinemas remaining that are independently owned and not part of a huge corporation. The Palace in Malton is run on a similar basis, as is the more famous open-air theatre called the 'Kinema in the Woods' in Woodall Spa in Lincolnshire.

The Hollywood Plaza was originally known as North Bay Cinema. Opening in 1914 it lasted only twelve years until 1926 when it was converted into a garage. It reverted back to its former use in 1981 when Mr Arthur Turner and his wife Mary bought it and put in the fixtures and fittings to create a working cinema. Arthur Turner introduced the Wurlitzer organ which he purchased from the Ritz in Ipswich. This was installed in such a way that it could be raised through a trap door in the floor of the stage prior to the film show and lowered again to allow projection onto the screen. Mr Turner repaired and maintained the organ and lifting machinery himself. He stored a cache of replacement pipes, spare organ parts (all initialled and number) and various projectors in a disused church in Globe Street. Perhaps they are still there. On one occasion the hydraulics broke down and the organ stayed firmly stuck below ground with Arthur sitting there on the attached seat waiting to be elevated. Harry had to advise him that he'd have to forego the organ recital that day and get on with the film.

Arthur would select old time music, which he knew well and play for about half an hour. His signature tune was "The Sun Has Got His Hat On", which I believe he played at almost every performance. I recall watching 'Four Weddings and a Funeral' at the Hollywood Plaza with Arthur playing 'wedding music', such as 'I'm Getting Married in the Morning'.

When Arthur bought the cinema in the late 70's he purchased 224 seats from the Spa Theatre (Scarborough). His curtains came from the Dorchester Theatre in Hull. The projector was a BHT Periscope system. BHT stands for British Thomas Hewson. At that time the cinema only opened from the May bank holiday week until the end of September i.e. the summer season.

Harry told me about the start of his career at 16 back in the late forties. He was the 4th projectionist at the Londesborough Theatre, which was at the top of Westborough between York Place and Valley Bridge Parade. This was the sister cinema to the Capitol, which is now Mecca Bingo, in that it had the same owner. Harry explained that the manager at the Capitol would play the organ prior to starting the film performance.

Sometimes a drama took place within the auditorium as well as on the screen. The Londesborough had seating on three levels. Harry recalls being called upon to replace a light bulb over the very steep stairway in the upper circle during a showing of "I See Ice" with George Formby. This entailed balancing precariously on a tall ladder. The audiences found this activity more interesting than the film and were soon all turned round and watching. When eventually the task was completed they

broke into spontaneous applause. Of course, the audience in other sections of the cinema had no idea what was going on.

Harry moved to the Aberdeen Walk Cinema where he worked until that too was converted into a bingo hall. He remembers the cinema being purchased by Pentland Hick from a Mr Prendergast of York who owned 5 cinemas in the North Yorkshire area. Mr Prendergast's son had a band, which played at the Gaiety. His son was called John Barry Prendergast but he dropped his surname and called his band the John Barry Seven. He is now a world famous composer for television and cinema including several James Bond film soundtracks. Pentland Hick also bought a tract of land in Ryedale and established a zoo. This was the start of Flamingo Land.

Not everyone behaved well in the cinema and on one occasion three or four youths who were causing a disturbance were asked to leave by the manager. They chose to ignore him and eventually the police were called. When the boys in blue arrived the team consisted of a mature well-built sergeant and a young scrawny constable. The youths failed to be impressed by the sergeant's request for them to leave so he instructed the constable to physically eject them. Apparently the constable shuffled along the row and hauled out the ringleader who was ignominiously ejected from the cinema into a waiting 'Black Maria'.

Harry explained that as an apprentice he would work with the chief projectionist or 2nd projectionist in order to watch how it was done and carry out the routine tasks such as lacing up the film through the projector and rewinding the film-reel. Originally the films were on small reels with 10 minutes of film on each one. It was Harry's job to splice two together to make a reel lasting twenty minutes. The projectionist had to have the next section of film ready to roll at exactly the right second to follow on smoothly from the previous reel. The arc lamp in the projector had a 'dowser,' which prevented the beam of light from being exposed prematurely. A single dot would appear in the top right-hand corner of the film as a warning that the strip of film was coming to an end. When two dots appeared the projectionist swiftly cut in with the new reel of film from a second beam and cut off the first beam. This procedure continued until all the film reels had been shown.

The films were stored and transported in 'cans'. These were kept in fireproof cabinets in a storage room with a special fireproof door. Films were usually shown as a continuous performance from 2pm to 10.15pm, with each complete performance being shown three times. Four projectionists never worked at the same time but teams of two always worked together. On one occasion, the van bringing the new film to Scarborough on the change-over day, which was Wednesday, tipped over on its way from Whitby spilling the films all over the road. A colleague of Harry's set out in a little three-wheeler car to salvage what he could because 'The show must go on'.

Cinema-goers had to make sure they entered the auditorium at the right time as they were in danger of catching the last few minutes of the big film before seeing the beginning. In theory, it was possible to sit in the cinema from early afternoon until after ten o'clock for the price of one ticket. When there was heavy demand Harry remembers showing a polite notice on the screen requesting that audience members who had seen the performance should leave the cinema. He recalls queues building

up outside the Futurist entrance and snaking up Blands Cliff on one side and right along the Foreshore as far as Gala Land at the other. I asked Harry if the film ever snapped or the projector broke down. He said it happened occasionally but not very often.

Harry recalls using the first 3D film in Scarborough when he was working at the Aberdeen Picture House. These films were on larger, 26-inch spools, which ran for over an hour. This was a bonus, but they were very heavy, making it difficult to manoeuvre them onto the projector. The audience was provided with special glasses, which blended the red and green light coming from the two projectors. In order to see the images on the film the projectionist had to keep swapping between two different pairs of spectacles in order to focus up both projectors correctly.

I was told about special effects that were sometimes used to impress the audience. During "House on a Haunted Hill" at the Gaiety one such stunt was employed. A skeleton was installed behind the masking to the right of the screen. When the skeleton in the film disappeared from the screen the 'real' skeleton was revealed which subsequently flew up to the top of the circle. A challenge was thrown down to find anyone brave enough to sit in the cinema alone and watch the scary film. One woman took up the challenge and a coffin was laid across the seats for dramatic effect. I'm told that the woman sat it out but smoked one cigarette after another throughout the entire performance.

In order to create publicity for the film 'king Kong' a young lady usherette was sent down to the sea-front in her civvies and instructed to sit nonchalantly on the railings by the foreshore. Eventually a car drew up and a 'gorilla' got out, (the doorman in disguise) and abducted her. Hopefully the eye-holes in the gorilla suit afforded him enough vision to kidnap the right girl.

Sometimes the local Watch Committee would not award a film a certificate allowing it to be shown. The panel consisted of a police officer and local councillors who were treated to a private showing. In the mid-50s the film 'Birth of a baby' was not thought suitable for the townspeople of Scarborough and it was never shown here.

I spent a wonderful Saturday afternoon hearing Mr Groom recall his memories. I hope I have managed to capture some of the local colour of Scarborough's cinema history over the past sixty years.

Jill Boyes

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