



Going to the Pictures in Wantage

by Reg Wilkinson

A memorable era ended when the Regent Cinema at Wantage ceased to show films on 31st July 1977. The ubiquitous bingo had triumphed again and the town was without a picture-house for the first time in over sixty years.

The inhabitants of Wantage first sampled the delights of moving pictures when an enterprising gentleman called Lay showed 'one-reelers' in the Victoria Cross Gallery in 1910. Then Captain J.C. Oakes had a purpose-built cinema constructed in Wallingford Street (the building which is now occupied by Wheeler's cycle shop), and was granted permission to exhibit films at Wantage Petty Sessions on 30th October 1914. This was after a critical examination of the building by magistrates and the local police superintendent. When the Picture Palace opened on 12th November 1914, it was the talk of the town and according to the local paper 'a crowded house inaugurated the venture'. The cinema was described as substantial and containing 330 comfortable seats. An electric generator and projection room were located in a separate building at the rear and separated from the main theatre by a thick wall.

A projector of the latest type was installed and so arranged that should the film catch fire only a small part of it could burn. Performances were continuous from 6.30 to 10.30 pm, with matinees on Wednesdays and Saturdays, and bicycles could be stored at no extra charge for the convenience of customers from the villages.

The new venture attracted the attention of the local press for several weeks after it opened. Typical examples of the complimentary phrases which described the cinema were '... considering the class of entertainment, it is not surprising that good audiences have been the rule', and 'The Picture Palace has got to be a popular rendezvous and the management are to be congratulated'.

A variety of moving pictures were shown. They included 'Dr Fenton's Ordeal' (a sensational drama), 'Grip of Ambition' (described as a Hepworth drama) 'Broncho Bill's Great Leap' (a thriller), and 'Across the Hall' (a delightful comedy). The Keystone Cops proved very popular, and 'Icy Episode' was one of their first films to be featured at Wantage. An evening devoted entirely to Keystone comedies attracted full houses a month after the cinema opened.

The war between Britain and Germany had started on 4th August 1914, and by the end of the year the conflict had started to have some influence on film production. The fall of Antwerp featured in one film which was shown towards the end of November, and in December a picture called 'Billy Boy' was described as a 'funny war topical'. The management of the Picture Palace donated the day's takings to the local Belgium Refugees' Christmas Fund on 23rd December. When hostilities broke out, Captain Oakes rejoined the army and the cinema was managed by Mr D.S. Holderness until the war

ended. When Captain Oakes returned, he engaged a young enthusiast, Mr A.G. Beardsley, as projectionist, and in 1924 Mr Beardsley purchased the cinema from its original owner.

Eleven years later, Mr Beardsley financed a new cinema called The Regent, which was built on the site of Gibbs's music shop at the east end of Wantage Market Place. The picture house quickly became the principal focus of entertainment for the surrounding area. In the 1940s and early 1950s it was not unusual for customers to form long queues outside the cinema, so popular were the films. Exhibiting films appears to have been a very worthwhile operation, and for many years Mr Beardsley made full use of the cinemas which he owned in Calne, Chipping Norton, Hungerford and Faringdon as well as Wantage.

By degrees, however, as people became more affluent, cinemas began to get less popular. The customers turned to television for entertainment or travelled further afield to participate in different types of relaxation. All over the country cinemas closed down and were converted into supermarkets or bingo halls.

After well over fifty years in the business, Mr Beardsley leased The Regent on 14th February 1976 to the firm which had taken over the cinema at Didcot. A sign reading 'BINGO - THE REGENT' appeared above the door, and the management started to run bingo sessions on three nights of the week, with film shows on the other nights. At that time, this type of combination did not appear to appeal to the people of Wantage, although it succeeded in Didcot, and at numerous other places. Soon it became apparent that there was no profit to be made from continuing to show films in Wantage, and when a new firm took over the lease of the cinema it decided to concentrate entirely on bingo after a final film was shown on 31st July 1977. On that date, the lights in the Regent apparently went up for the last time, and a romantic, adventurous era had ended.

However, on 10th March 1983, the Regent once more opened its doors to movie patrons and gave them an opportunity to see Stephen Spielberg's 'E.T.'. This decision on the part of the management proved very popular, and once more queues stretching almost round to the old Wallingford Street cinema have formed outside the Regent. Films are now shown on four nights of the week, with bingo sessions on the other three nights. It seems that another era in 'picture going' has started in Wantage. If the Regent can put on a series of programmes in the future which will continue to appeal to the public, there is no reason why the new era should not continue as long, and be as romantic as the last.

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