

TWO BACK STALLS, PLEASE!

We all remember the days when Hull had a profusion of cinemas – the centre pages of the Hull Daily Mail listed every “flicks” from east to west of the city, flea-pit to palace, and we all had our favourites. Living in the green suburbs to the west, the first on my list was the Priory.

The Priory cinema was at the junction of Calvert Lane with Spring Bank and it was there, at the age of about ten, that I attended that weekly orgy of infantile mayhem known as the “Children’s Matinee”. Many of you may remember those Saturday afternoons. A shilling would admit you to the delights of Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, Tarzan, Zorro or assorted space monsters. But if you knew the ropes you didn’t need a shilling to get in. Outside there would negotiations whereby twelve kids each with a penny would nominate a leader. He would collect the necessary twelve pence, pay the accumulated shilling entry fee and make for the toilets at the back. There he would open the window allowing the remaining eleven investors to climb in. It was a wheeze that worked well until the manager twigged that his tally of shillings didn’t match the gate and realised there was a leak in the toilet. Result: Locked window.



AND FOR HOW LONG DID YOU SUPERVISE
CHILDREN’S MATINÉES?

It was impossible to hear the soundtrack of any film for the boos or cheers of the audience as cowboys and red Indians shot at each other, zombies walked the streets or detectives chased villains over rooftops. Sometimes the desperate manager would halt proceedings and screen a slide to the effect “Quiet Please!” He’d have been better occupied trying to control the weather. Sometimes an exciting bit of film would suddenly stop and a slide would be shown with a message; “Will Brian Higgins please return home at once!” (It wasn’t always a kid called Brian Higgins of course but you get my drift.) If Brian was spotted heading for the exit his farewell would be derision plus unguided missiles. There must have been many a cinema manager throughout the realm who dreaded Saturdays. Keeping an eye on events on the back row of the stalls in the evening were one thing but being a herder of wild animals in

the afternoon was beyond the call of duty. As for the poor usherettes, they deserved campaign medals.

Some years after the Saturday Matinees one realised that girls were more interesting than they had been. There were few places where a young lad could take a girl other than go dancing or to a cinema. If it was a first-date visit to a cinema the event had to be planned carefully, much like a military exercise:-

1. Which cinema? – If the girl lived nearby you both went on the same bus. Question: Pay our own bus fare? (Not very gallant) or I pay for both of us (extra cost)? – see item 3.
2. Which film? - Nothing too exciting or you might forget she’s there. Not a musical – she might fancy one but Howard Keel stuff was a real turn-off for me; far better something with a couple of songs and a gunfight.

3. Who pays and where? – If I'm paying, maybe the West Park on Anlaby Road (a bit of a fleapit). If we're splitting the cost it might be the Tower (double seats in the back stalls; were they only for overweight people?). Forget about the Cecil (rumoured that they charged extra for the organist) or The Regal (expensive and often smelled of cabbage from the restaurant).

4. Liberties? – (By arrangement) she *might* let you hold her hand on a first date. If in doubt, leave it out.



With those considerations in mind I remember deciding on "Sink the Bismark" which was showing at the Carlton on Anlaby Road (the bus stop was right outside and I could afford to pay). I can't remember if there was a second date after that. The picture shows the Carlton before my time (c. 1930) but in a better state than it is today.

The Dorchester and Criterion in George Street were good cinemas but you had to leave the late show before the National Anthem started because the last bus had gone by 10.30 and it was a dash to get to the station in time. In those days all Hull shut down after ten o'clock. The risk was being detained by a royalist blocking the stalls who insisted on standing to attention until the very last bar of "God Save the Queen" before you could get out.

Temptation entrapped me early on when a friend suggested we try our first "X" film. This was at the Tivoli in South Street. The Tivoli had once been a small theatre where I saw my first post-war Christmas pantomime but latterly was turned into a cinema showing newsreels, cartoons and foreign films. To adolescent boys "foreign films" meant "rude films" and showing that particular week was a French item with the name "La Ronde" (starring Anton Walbrook, a star of whom we knew nothing). We didn't know what a "Ronde" was either but reckoned that if it was French it could be naughty and therefore worth investigation. Sadly the anticipated thrill of the unmentionable was thwarted not least by the fear of being seen when the lights went up. What if someone saw us and told our parents? How would we explain ourselves when we had said we were just going to Hammonds? In any case "La Ronde" was a let-down because it was in French, all talk and no action and we couldn't read the sub-titles because of the big men in the seats in front of us.

We all have our regrets and I reflect on how I must have ruined a few family outings to the cinema when I was young, removals in terror from "Snow White" – the wicked stepmother, "The Wizard of Oz" – the witch, "Pinocchio" – the whale, and the ultimate indignity of being reduced to tearful hysterics at Bob Hope in "The Princess and the Pirate".

I began this at the Priory cinema and I remember how it looked shortly after its closure. I think that the last film shown there was called "River of No Return" – an apt farewell to place that had provided many hours of pleasure and excitement. There are those who know all there is to know about Hull's long-closed cinemas. People who can tell you who built them and owned them, the

number of seats they contained and probably a list of the films shown. I just remember them for the atmosphere they created, the fug of a thousand fags, the lady with the tray of ices, the usherette with the revealing torch and the organist, rising from the cellar on his Wurlitzer, who changed colour as he played selections from Rose Marie, and all for “two back stalls, please!”

Richard Pearson