

MERCIA CINEMA SOCIETY

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New books charts Basingstoke's chequered cinema history

Basingstoke's chequered picture-house history is told in detail in a newly published book, *Basingstoke Entertained*, by cinema and theatre historian Mervyn Gould.

The fully illustrated account is published by Mercia Cinema Society at £8 95p and is available from the Willis Museum or post-free by sending a cheque made payable to Mercia Cinema Society to Stuart Smith, Mercia Sales, 100 Wickfield Road, Hackenthorpe, Sheffield, S12 4TT.

The book tells of three early cinemas, converted from the Corn Exchange, a swimming baths, and the Drill Hall. It records the fire which destroyed the Grand in 1925, the race to show the first talkies in 1929, and the building of a super cinema on a concrete raft on swampy ground in 1935. It notes the first incursion of a national cinema circuit when Union Cinemas acquired three Basingstoke venues in 1937 and of the muted opening of the Savoy in the first months of the second world war. There are some who will remember the formation of the ABC Minors' Club in 1945 and the experiments with 3D and Cinemascope in the 1950s. The struggles of the cinema industry nationally are reflected in the closing of the Savoy in 1966 and the conversion of the ABC to provide two screens in 1977. But the resurgence of moving pictures as popular entertainment is evidenced by the opening of the Warner multiplex in 1990.

It is not certain when or where films were first shown in Basingstoke but the first documented screening of what were called 'animated pictures' was at the Corn Exchange in 1900.

Basingstoke's first permanent cinema came in 1910 with the aptly named Electric Theatre, at the bottom of Wote Street, converted from a disused swimming bath and provided with its own electricity generator - although the film-projector was turned by hand.

George Casey, who leased the Corn Exchange in 1913 and converted it into the Grand Exchange Cinema and Vaudeville Theatre, was perhaps the man who had the most impact on Basingstoke entertainment, subsequently converting the old drill hall into the Pavilion dance hall, reconstructing it as the Plaza, and opening the purpose-built Waldorf in 1935.

Author Mervyn Gould threads the account of Basingstoke's cinemas with details of both professional and amateur theatrical entertainment in the town. He brings his knowledge as a professional member of both the Stage Management Association and the Association of Lighting Designers to this history.

He started his career in 1963 in the projection room of a 1937 super-cinema, reminiscent of the Waldorf here. After touring and West End work, he became a university technical tutor in stage management and lighting.

This is his fourth cinema/theatre history book, and three more are in preparation, for expected publication next year.

Mercia Cinema Society was founded in 1980 to promote and publish research into the history of picture houses. It is the country's principal publisher of cinema history and *Basingstoke Entertained* is its 63rd book.

Ends

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Mervyn Gould can supply any illustration from the book as a .jpg for review purposes

Mercia Cinema Society history and list of current publications can be viewed on the web-site at www.merciacinema.org.uk