

The Mark of Zorro

Preston's first picture venue, the Star Theatre on the south-eastern corner of High and Gower Streets opened on September 28, 1922, the evening of the Show Day holiday. The audience was entertained by one of the cinema swashbuckling sensations of the day, "The Mark of Zorro" starring Douglas Fairbanks, Marguerite De Le Motte and Noah Beery ...

The movie was based on the 1919 story "The Curse of Capistrano" by Johnston McCulley, which introduced the masked hero, Zorro - to date, it has been re-made three times, in 1940 starring Tyrone Power, as a tele-movie in 1974, and again in 1998 starring Antonio Banderas with Anthony Hopkins and Catherine Zeta-Jones, the latter also having a sequel, "The Legend of Zorro" filmed in 2005.

The masked hero probably became better known to today's "baby-boomers" via an immensely popular series in the early years of television in Australia.



The Star (St. James)

In a scoop, the new Star managed to screen "Zorro" a week before the Westgarth Theatre in Northcote which had been operating for just on a decade. Despite the local patrons christening the theatre on the holiday, the "official" opening wasn't until the following evening when the Shire Council led by the Mayor, Cr. Gilbert and Mrs Robinson and various local dignitaries gave the enterprise their municipal blessing.

The venue was operated by Star Theatre Co. Ltd., the first chairman of Directors Mr. George Apsted.

The Apsted family had been builders around the Preston areas since the mid-1880s. George was regarded for several years late in the nineteenth century as the crack shot of the Preston Rifle Club, winning many club competitions and trophies in inter-club and State tournaments.

The company secretary was given simply as Mr. Lascelles; the company secretary as Frank Ludlow, the father of several sons that contributed to the Preston and Northcote football and cricket clubs was listed as a director.

Ludlow in commercial terms "put his money where his mouth was", sub-leasing the offices right on the corner of Gower Street for several years as the base for his real estate agency. There were several shops incorporate in the design.

Credit for the design and construction of the building was given to Mr. Alex McDonald, but later reports suggest that the true heroes behind the theatre's construction were the brothers Messrs A.F. and W.E. (Walter Edward) Edmonds who had run regular movie sessions for some 18 months in a hall hired at the Shire Hall, the



The Star Theatre (1922)

enterprise earning the pair enough capital to buy the theatre site and proceed with the formation of the company, which had a paid-up capital of £12,000 including 25 preference "syndicate" shares of £100 each.

Edmonds remained manager of the Star and later the Gowerville, but died in 1934 when the Gowerville was closed due to the Depression. The Star Theatre Co. also managed the Planet Theatre.

The Star is credited in part (along with its proximity to the Town Hall) as being one of the reasons that High Street became the main shopping strip in Preston during the boom times of the 1920s, replacing Plenty Road's prominence in earlier years.

Despite the instant popularity of the theatre, the company struck problems some six months later when it applied to the Council for permission to run "entertainments" on a Sunday evening "after church hours".

The Shire had been under pressure for some time to prevent the playing of Sunday sports on Council controlled property and a predictable delegation of church leaders and a hastily arranged "congregation" packed the Council chambers to ensure the application was rejected, Cr. Lewellyn Jones the only one to vote in favour of the proposal.

Lascelles the following week wrote to the Leader, complaining that his company had been somewhat misrepresented. The "entertainments" were not to be moving pictures (their respectability still a little open to question) and he emphasised that the whole proceeds "without any deduction whatsoever" was to be handed to the Shire for whatever charitable purpose it saw fit.

Like most other theatres, the movies (and later "talkies") were not the only "entertainments". Even the unofficial opening night featured "violin selections and a lady soloist" and similar performances kept the patrons happy while projectionists worked to change reels of fragile film, some of which had to be packed and driven to a nearby theatre for re-screening the same night

The Star is known to have been renovated in the mid-1930s and again around 1950 when it became the St. James Theatre.

Operationally, it was the longest surviving movie theatre in Preston proper, lasting until the mid-1960s despite the obvious counter-attraction of television and rock 'n roll dances at the Town Hall and the converted Circle Theatre further north in High Street.

The Gowerville

The Gowerville Theatre at 175-77 Plenty Road just south of Bell Street opened on 5 June, 1926 to seemingly provide some competition for the Star; in reality, the backers were the same group that built the Star. The theatre at that time provided seating for around 970 patrons.

Like many theatres of the time, there were always a few gimmicks to attract patrons, the Edmonds brothers hitting on the idea of sponsoring awards for players from the Preston Football Club to be voted for by customers on the traditionally slow Monday night.

The final results for 1927 saw Danny Warr win the Star Theatre award with 2447 votes from Jack Watt with 2384 and Arthur Ludlow (one of Frank's sons) a distant third.



For the somewhat less glamorous "fairest", the Gowerville patrons went for Dave Holliday on 2715 votes, a clear winner from the 1926 "Recorder Cup", now the J. J. Liston Trophy winner, "Bluey" Summers on 1863.

On these figures, the total number of votes cast at each theatre probably totalled around 8,000 to 9,000, undoubtedly a tidy box-office return for the modest cost of two trophies!

At the time, the Gowerville opened, it was described as "one of the most modern in the suburbs" and it was upgraded in May 1930 with the installation of "special talkie gear at immense expense". On the programme was "Mickey the Mouse".

The expenditure proved premature.

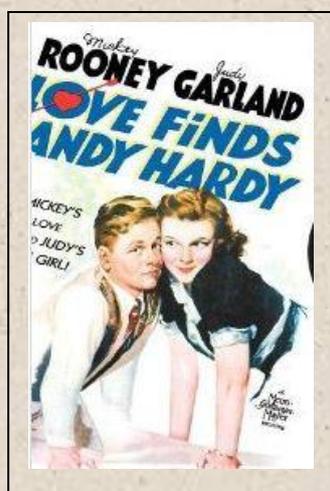
With the effects of the Great Depression biting hard in Preston, the Edmonds brothers decided that it was uneconomical to run both theatres and the Gowerville closed later in 1930, not re-opening until 3 December, 1938, just a week after the Circle Theatre opened in High Street.

The operators by now were Messrs King, Guest and Luxton, who in the intervening years had opened the Rivoli Theatre in Gilbert Road (Walter Edmonds, the key figure in establishing the theatre died in 1934 at just 47 years of age).

The Gowerville Theatre closed again in 1949 and was extensively renovated, emerging in 1951 as the Melody, still under the control of King, Guest and Luxton. The capacity at that time is believed to have been around 1,250, the largest of any Preston cinema.

The advent of television in 1956 had the predictable impact, and perhaps because of its isolation from the main shopping hub, the Melody closed two or three years before the St. James and was subsequently demolished for an office complex.

The Planet



The Planet Theatre on the corner on High and Miller Streets opened on 30 March, 1939, again under the management of W. H. Edmonds and as part of the Star Theatre Company.

The architect was Mr. R. Le-Poer Terry and the builder Geo. Prentice Pty. Ltd., the theatre featuring "Dunlopillo seats, deaf aids in both the stalls and dress circle, and a crying room' at the back of the stalls with separate speakers and volume control", the latter presumably for the soundtrack and not the crying child!.

Edmonds also suggested that a private car park would be available for patrons alongside the theatre as soon as building materials had been removed. The theatre seated around 900.

It was noted that the theatre had long-term contracts in place with both Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Paramount Pictures; the opening night feature, *Love Finds Any Hardy*, starring Mickey Rooney, Lewis Stone, Judy Garland and Lana Turner.

The building after the theatre closed at the end of 1959 was used for some years as the office and showroom of K. G. Luke Pty. Ltd., a silver-plating company owned by Sir Kenneth Luke, the long-serving president of the Carlton Football Club and later the Victorian Football League.

It also was used for many years by Kevin Dennis Motors, and continued in later life as part of the Autobahn Automotive chain and up until 2010 as Ace Auto Accessories.

The building was demolished in early 2012, apparently for yet another multi-storey apartment block now dominating the Junction.

The Rivoli

The only theatre building remaining in Preston is the Rivoli at 71-75 Gilbert Road (on the corner of Oakover Road).

The Rivoli was opened on 16 November, 1935 at a gathering of 150 people by the Mayor of Preston, Cr. Harry Swain, built by Preston Theatres Pty. Ltd. and leased to Messrs King, Guest and Luxton, also from 1938 the operators of the Gowerville after it was re-opened.

The building cost £5,300 and seating and fittings £2,000, but Preston Theatres Ltd. appear to have fallen into financial difficulties and the theatre was auctioned by receivers in October, 1937, bringing a price of £9,650.

It was noted the sale was subject to a five-year lease, rental £17/10 per week but to rise to £20 the following year. It was suggested the theatre accommodated about 900, two shops were included with a frontage of 64ft 5in to Gilbert Road and a depth of 110 feet.

The lessees operated the theatre until 1958 when it was transferred to O'Halloran Theatres of Swan Hill before closing later the same year.

After it had ceased operation and the building was used as offices and a warehouse, the first tenants being the Austral Jewel Case Company.

That functionality continues today and parts of a refurbishment circa 1950 are retained; the auditorium interior has some well-preserved detailing, the upper balcony still has seats, and a screen remains above the warehouse section. Much of the upper level is converted into a residential apartment.

A small reserve (significantly the Harry Swain Reserve) behind the old theatre was used in the 1950s by a local junior football team. Originally known as the Preston Boys club in the late 1940s, it adopted the theatre's name around 1950 and became the Rivoli Stars, boasting amongst their "Stars", later Collingwood premiership captain and club legend, Murray Weideman.

The Circle

The "Circle Theatre" at 499 High Street was one of several cinemas which opened in Preston during the movie boom time from the late 1930s, its art deco style and was one of the more unique designs, advertisements boasting that there was not a right angle to be seen anywhere in the interior.

The building was constructed in 1938 by W. Braithwaite Pty Ltd., tanners, and leased to Hoyts Theatres Limited.

The founder of the tannery, William Braithwaite (senior) acquired the land in 1866 and



established Braithwaite's Tannery in Murray Road with the family home *Northallerton* on the corner of High Street. The site of the theatre was originally part of the *Northallerton* gardens.

The architects Cowper, Murphy and Applegate designed the Circle Theatre at around the same time as well-known Northcote identity Edgar "Son" Yeomans had the Sun Theatre in Yarraville built in a very similar design (one of just a handful of theatres from the era still operating, Yeoman's other theatre, the Westgarth coincidentally one of the others).

The Circle was opened on 25 November, 1938 by the Mayor and Mayoress of Preston, Cr. and Mrs Fred. L. Pike in front of a group of 600, including councillors, directors and executives of Hoyts Limited, and leading citizens of the district and their wives.

The guests were treated to a screening of the Warner Brothers movie *Valley of the Giants*, a full-colour movie starring Wayne Morris, Claire Trevor, Charles Bickford and Alan Hale (not to be confused with 1919 and 1927 silent movies of the same name).

The theatre catered for around 920 patrons and continued operations into the early 1960s when Hoyts sold it and it was converted into a ballroom, primarily for rock-an-roll dances.

It was later used as a dance studio and reception centre before being demolished in 1976 to make way for the Circle Arcade.

The Reservoir Palais

(aka Reservoir Plaza, Cinema North, Village Reservoir)

Remarkably, the theatre that survived the longest in the City of Preston was never originally designed as a cinema.

In March 1928, former auction rooms in Epping Road (later 909 High Street, just north of Edwardes Street) advertised motion pictures for the first time by Messrs L. E. Rossiter and R. E. Emslie. On either side of the entrance were two former shops, one housing the projection equipment, the other the ticket box and with movies being shown twice weekly.

The original enterprise did not survive the Depression, and early in 1933, the site became the Palais de Dance before being closed in August, 1935 by the Health Department.

The building was of a rudimentary design with an unlined tin roof and exterior toilets on either side of the rear of the building. It was re-opened in June, 1936 by Victoria Theatres Pty. Ltd. with fewer seats and internal conveniences.

The name was changed in July, 1943, to the Reservoir Plaza Various alterations were made, but patching up the basic structure prove inadequate wasn't enough and Consolidated Theatres, who were then in control, erected a new auditorium next door in 1955, one of the first built with Cinemascope presentations in mind and increasing the capacity from 500 to just under 900.

As the other nearby "hard top" theatres closed with the advent of television and the introduction of drive-in theatres, the Plaza was the only screen in the area by the mid-1960s.

Village (then known as City Cinemas) were expanding into the suburbs and in December, 1968 took an interest in the venue, changing the name to Cinema North. Throughout the 1970s it remained a very popular theatre, to the point that a second, smaller auditorium named the Oriental was added in 1981 at the rear of the main theatre, then renamed as the Merion, the complex generically known as Village Reservoir.

Although, the theatres survived the video boom of the early 80s, the death knell sounded with the opening of an 8-screen multiplex at the nearby Northland shopping centre in 1987.

The larger, original Cinema North auditorium was demolished and, although the newer and smaller screen carried on for a few more years as a theatre in the boutique style (with a capacity of around 240), the inevitable came in 1993 and the rest of the building was demolished for shops.



The Progress

When is a theatre not a theatre?

The question may well be asked of the Progress "Theatre".

An extensive database of Australian (and some overseas) cinemas compiled by Flinders University (caarp.flinders.edu.au/venue) has an entry for the Progress Theatre in Gilbert Street (sic), West Preston and being operated by King, Guest and Luxton .

The theatre was actually the Progress Hall, well removed from the Rivoli further north and just south of Jacka Street.

The database suggests that movies may have been shown in the Hall as early as 1946 with the capacity variously listed as between 200 and 300.

Screenings appear to have ceased around 1959 when the hall was operated by Dee-Jay Theatres Pty. Ltd.

Venue : Skyline / Hoyts Drive-in, Preston

Skyline / Hoyts Drive-in, **Preston** ...

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