

KINGSTON CINEMA HISTORY PROJECT

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW WITH JOHN McCARTHY AT KINGSTON HISTORY CENTRE

INTERVIEW DATE: 25<sup>th</sup> May 2022

INTERVIEWER AND SUMMARISER: Alison Brennan

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FULL NAME: John Anthony McCarthy    DATE OF BIRTH: 7<sup>th</sup> June 1928

FATHER: Chief Draughtsman for Surrey County Council    MOTHER: Housewife

John has been Chair of the Kingston Society, Kingston Arts Council and Friends of Kingston Museum. He has played a key role in lobbying for the preservation of local historic buildings. John's working life started at Surrey County Council in the Highways Department. When he retired he was Principal Engineer at the GLC. ("When Maggie Thatcher swung her handbag.") Along with others, John was instrumental in securing the future of the GLC County Hall building.

The McCarthy family moved to Kingston when John was five in 1933, settling in Norbiton. Kingston was a self-confident town, proud of its heritage and Royal Borough status. John's father said the town "fought above its weight." John attended Holy Cross Convent Preparatory School in New Malden until on the outbreak of war, he moved with his family to Northampton where he attended Saturday morning children's cinema. John returned to Kingston as a teenager after the war ended.

Pre-war in Kingston, John saw Shirley Temple's "Animal Crackers in my Soup". The song played constantly on the radio at the time. He watched "All Quiet on the Western Front" at the Regal Cinema at the end of Canbury Park Road. He remembers bi-planes swooping over the screen. The script for the latter film was written by R.C. Sheriff an ex-pupil of Kingston Grammar School. The scale and beauty of the Regal building made a big impression, also the swishy curtains and the Wurlitzer coming up in the interval. The Wurlitzer had a grand piano attached so was a big beast. His mother disliked the Wurlitzer and thought it too noisy. The Regal had a lovely tea room and small ballroom.

John is predominantly interested in cinema buildings. He recounts (quoting research by June Sampson, a reliable local historian and journalist) that when films started to be shown to the public at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, travelling salesmen types would hire a church hall, or other local amenity for a limited run. Theatres and music halls would also show films, and there were no purpose-built cinemas. The first cinema in Kingston was in a large shed in New Malden, behind a parade of shops on Coombe Road near the railway station. N.B. *This building existed when John was interviewed, but a few weeks later was demolished.* A church hall in St James Road, Kingston also showed films. From the late 1920s on the Royal City Theatre in Fife Road (site now of Sports Direct) showed films. The theatre burnt down in 1941.

The first purpose-built cinema John went to was the Elite (where Wilko now is). The Elite was built in the late 20s and had a church organ rather than a Wurlitzer. It also had a café. Postwar John saw Charlie Chaplin films there. The cinema was on the B movie circuit. He also went to the Granada cinema which had a beautiful foyer and ceiling. John once went to an organ concert at the Granada but didn't go to other entertainments/musical events there. Post war, cinema declined, especially with the mass introduction of televisions into people's homes. John himself rarely went to the cinema post war, preferring the theatre. He did attend the last showing at the Kinema (situated next

to where Cromwell Road bus station now is.) The Kinema was a fleapit, with bare walls and no frills, just rows of seats and showed mainly X-rated films. John was invited into the projection box, and he asked if the original projector stands could be preserved, but was told no.

The Kingston Society lobbied successfully for the listing of the Granada which is now occupied by Pryzm Nightclub. The ceiling and foyer appear well-looked after and safe for now. The Wurlitzer from the Granada went to the Brentford Musical Museum. The Regal Cinema (later Gala Bingo) building is being redeveloped. Parts of the building are listed and are to be preserved. The Kingston Society is keeping a close eye on what is happening. John saw some photos of the interior recently, which showed it to be in a reasonable state. Kingston Rose Theatre is now on the site of the old Odeon cinema building which was demolished.

Between the two world wars, Kingston had a thriving film industry. Studios in Berrylands made WW1 war films. The studios were not popular with local residents who were kept awake at night by noisy bangs and powerful arc lights. The heavy use of power meant the voltage reduced locally. These films often premiered at the Surbiton Odeon which is now a Weatherspoons. There was a small cinema in Tolworth, probably also an Odeon.

John has a pragmatic approach to the preservation of old cinema buildings. He asks "Is it a good design, is it in a good state, what can it be used for? Is it economic to keep it.?" He doesn't regret the passing of buildings which are not beautiful and don't have a use. He is pleased that for the moment at the least the old Regal and the Granada building are safe and being used.

John has passed a CD Rom about the history of Kingston Cinemas to Digital Works which was then forwarded to the Borough's Archivist. This contains a map of locations, key data and photographs. John would very much like to see the information in the CD rom used to produce a booklet: An Illustrated History of the Cinema and Theatres in Kingston, perhaps at the behest of the Friends of Kingston Museum, similar to a booklet they produced about the History of Kingston Railways. John states that he carefully researched the CD ROM information and says that another pamphlet about the history of Kingston's cinemas contains inaccuracies.