

## AN ORAL HISTORY OF KINGSTON CINEMAS

INTERVIEWEE: Mary Greenslade

DATE OF BIRTH: 1931. PLACE OF BIRTH: Mill Hill, London

PARENTS' OCCUPATIONS

Father: worked for the Coal Board; Mother: Housewife

Interview location: Kingston History Centre

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Interviewer: Christina McCulloch, Summariser: Alison Brennan

Mary's first visit to the cinema was to the Plaza, New Malden High Street, in the mid-thirties. She was very impressed by the film, "Animal Crackers in my Soup" and its star, Shirley Temple. Most early cinema-going was with family in school holidays or weekends. They often watched Walt Disney films: "Bambi" was a big favourite. The first colour film she saw was "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." In the early 40s there were many patriotic, morale boosting war films, for example, Noel Coward's "In Which We Serve". At first the family stayed away when there were raids on, but later they went anyway.

Choice of cinema was determined by the film, prompted by advertising in the Surrey Comet and personal recommendation. Films were advertised the preceding week at the cinema. Kingston had five cinemas, each with a particular character. Mary preferred the cosy Elite which had an upstairs café and carpeting. They mainly went to the newer and more spacious Granada. She liked sitting in the Circle, as the architecture was wonderful, and you could see the whole cinema. The Odeon Shannon Corner was a spellbinding building, luxurious and comfortable. The Odeon, Kingston, also a striking building had an impressive foyer. Sometimes the organ came up in the interval at the Regal also at the Granada. The Kinema was more unusual. As a teenager she cycled there solo to see "Never Take No for an Answer."

Mary's taste in films evolved as she became a teenager. She fell in love with Lawrence Olivier in "Hamlet." She chose films because of favourite stars like Stewart Granger, James Mason, Vivien Leigh, Margaret Lockwood and Jean Simmons. She later loved Italian films, e.g. Visconti's, and other foreign films shown at the Kinema. She used to queue for the cinema with friends on a Saturday night, and if they missed the beginning, they stayed for the start of the next showing, as there were continuous showings during the day. The programme comprised a shorter "B" film, a newsreel and cartoon, then the interval followed by the main film. The atmosphere was foggy as many people smoked. Managers were always men, and tickets and interval ice-creams were sold by the usherettes who were always women. An usherette showed you to your seat with a torch. Going to the cinema was special and she dressed smartly but comfortably, keeping up with her schoolfriends. On one occasion when alone in the cinema Mary was unhappy and had to move because a stranger (a man) put his hand on her knee.

The family usually sat in the mid stalls. She especially enjoyed going with her grandmother and great aunt. The cheapest seats near the screen cost 1s 3d or 1s 6d. This meant craning your neck and getting a headache. Circle seats cost 3s 6d and were a special treat.

Cinema has been very important in Mary's life, magical and spell-binding, teaching her about production, continuity and literature, triggering a life-long passion for drama. She remembers many marvellous films. She wanted to do film continuity, but after trying unsuccessfully to get into the BBC, went to drama school, and became a drama and acting teacher, something she continues to do independently today. She was sad when the Elite and the Kinema closed but by the early fifties she was at drama school and went to the theatre and the Curzon cinema in town. She doesn't now go to

the cinema in Kingston but still keeps a strong interest in film and cinema, listening to radio critique and coverage of films as she always has done.