

Summary of Oral Interview of Nigel Wolland created as Part of the Projected Histories Project

(Stored in the Archives, Kingston Heritage Service)

Summary by Christina McCulloch, Kingston History Centre. July, 2022.

Early Days

Nigel Wolland got his first job as a trainee projectionist in a cinema in Walton-on-Thames in 1955 shortly after he had left school. He started off rewinding the films and was taught how to care and look after equipment.

He remembers it being a very busy role, starting from the early morning to late at night. There would be a dark room where the projector would be running and there was also a staff room with an oven and kettle to make tea. He didn't work alone, and usually he would be working with 2-3 people and they would be allowed meal breaks.

As well as the projection work, his role would also involve other types of maintenance jobs around the building such as putting in the lamps and managing the heating and ventilation. The pay wasn't very good, but he stayed in the job as he loved it. If you worked on Saturday mornings you got extra pay. He always enjoyed the job and got a buzz from hearing the audience and seeing them enjoying the experience. Although the job had very long hours and anti-social hours, for example in the evenings when everyone else would be out, he got used to it and didn't mind as he enjoyed the work.

The uniform was just normal clothes, however they were supplied with a house coat and overalls for the maintenance work they had to do around the building.

The projector would run 20 minute reels and then would need to be rewound and loaded up. There were sometimes issues if colleagues put the wrong reel on by mistake.

During the early 1960s whilst working on relief, he worked in Surbiton, and got moved to new cinemas when one closed. When he first started at the Surbiton Odeon it was open 7 days a week but with restricted openings as less people would be on duty. He was always part of a good team. In the Surbiton Odeon there were only three of them and they all got on well. When they introduced restricted openings there would only be one person working at a time. He met his wife whilst working at the Odeon Surbiton. She worked there as a part-time usherette and they got married a few years later.

He was the first relief projectionist at Kingston Odeon. He was also involved in the union which involved going around all the cinemas and collecting people's union dues. Remembers that when he started doing relief work at the Odeon Kingston, there were two lady projectionists. The older lady started during the war, when many women took on work as projectionists, with many staying in the role after the war. There were even some cinemas which had all female projectionist teams.

Preferred working on relief as you would get money for meal breaks and travel. He also loved it as he got a chance to work on a range of projectors from old to new.

Perks of the job included seeing all the films that he had put on. Additionally, as he got to know the people working in the other cinemas, he would never have to pay.

The pecking order for the projectionists would go from chief projector, senior projector, 2nd projector, 3rd projector, 4th projector and lastly the trainee projector (rewind boy).

He was promoted up to 3rd projector at the ABC cinema and then was offered 2nd projector at the Odeon and eventually became chief projector at the age of 21.

Cinemas

There were mainly Odeon cinemas in the borough, including in Kingston, New Malden and Tolworth. Remembers the Grenada being very ornate and very large. The Odeon cinemas which were built in the 1930's however were less ornate.

The evenings were the busiest. There were always a large choice of films in Kingston and all the latest releases. There were 5 cinemas in total in Kingston centre. The ABC was the only one equipped with 70mm.

The afternoons were usually not very busy, they may get a few pensioners coming in but during the school holidays it got very busy in the afternoons, when the cinema would show lots of children's films.

When popular films were on in the cinemas it would be busy all day, especially at the weekends. Saturday nights were the busiest as that would be the last night of a showing for any particular film as they only ran for 7 days.

Saturday mornings were also busy. Mother's would drop off their children at the cinema at around 10am and would go shopping and then come and pick the children up again at 12pm.

Remembers that in the early days the rock 'n' roll films would cause quite a stir, for example *Rock around the clock* starring Elvis Presley. Films starring Cliff Richard would also cause much stir and excitement and the managers would often have to tell people to sit down and be quiet.

In the early days the Kingston Empire had live shows on. The bigger Odeon's may have shown pantomimes if they had the facilities and one of the Odeon's hosted the BAFTAs.

In the suburbs especially, the timesheets for the cinemas were worked out from when the last bus was e.g. 10.30pm.

The late night shows on Saturday nights would show horror films etc. If you were working on a late show you would have to have your own transport or the company would arrange taxi's for the team. Even remembers dropping people off locally.

Workers were moved around a lot when Odeon's got closed. They didn't get sacked but were instead moved to work in the next closest Odeon or put on relief.

Music

Where he worked there wasn't a Wurlitzer but instead they had the British version called a Compton as Odeon's would only use British equipment. He loved the organ and knew many of the organists.

The ABC cinema did regular concerts and they had a Wurlitzer, as did the Granada cinema.

Some of the larger cinemas did pop shows and one night stands such as the Grenada and the Regal. Popular bands would play there such as The Beatles.

Technology

The main changes he remembers were with sound which became more amplified. Started with a single mono soundtrack and then Dolby came in and introduced noise reduction, then surround sound, sub-based speakers and 6 track in larger cinemas. When new technology would come in, he would just learn with the guys on the job.

He saw the advent of digital cinema which came around in the 1990s.

Later days

As cinemas began to close in other areas, he ended up working in the West End more and retired seventeen years ago as Chief Engineer at the Odeon Leicester square.

His proudest moment was when he was introduced to the Queen in 1990 and awarded an MBE for his services. He also received a letter from the Mayor of Kingston.