

AN ORAL HISTORY OF KINGSTON CINEMAS

INTERVIEWEE: Simon David Brown, Film historian and archivist

DATE OF BIRTH: 1970

PLACE OF BIRTH: Hammersmith, lived in New Malden as a child and currently

MOTHER: A housewife FATHER: Provided skips for 51 years and was awarded an OBE for services to waste disposal

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Kingston History Centre DATE OF INTERVIEW: 23RD May 2022

INTERVIEWER: Alison Brennan SUMMARISER: Alison Brennan

Simon Brown set his personal account of cinema going in the context of his professional knowledge of cinema and film history.

The first film he remembers seeing was “The Towering Inferno” in 1974/75, aged about 5, He went with his parents, probably to Kingston Granada. He was very worried when the film stopped for an interval at a dramatic scene with Paul Newman trying to save his family after a gas explosion. He was desperate to know what happened.

After seeing Star Wars in 1978 Simon went more often. He was impressed by “Superman” and “Star Trek”. He had a strong emotional response to films and was inconsolable aged 9, when a character died in “Black Hole” (viewed at Wimbledon Odeon). In 1982/3 Simon started going to the cinema several times a month prompted by magazine and TV film programme recommendations. He didn’t go to children’s Saturday morning screenings but saw some Children’s Film Foundation films which included Dennis Waterman in “Just William”.

He usually went to one of the three Kingston cinemas, the Odeon, the Granada or the Kinema. He would drag one of his parents with him. He preferred the Granada which had a breath-taking art deco foyer with chandeliers and a sweeping staircase. He doesn’t remember how the Odeon looked-it was bland. The Kinema was a guilty secret, a fleapit, a complete dive and grubby. 8 months before it closed in 83, he went to the Kinema, now called Studio 7 to see “Blade Runner”. Hating the film, his Dad left Simon and waited in the pub. Simon was under-age, but as long as you paid, the cinema let you in. His brother and a friend, also under-age got in to see the Exorcist disguised by motorcycle helmets.

You queued for a popular film, around a grotty alleyway to the side of the cinema and would queue for the next showing if you didn’t get in the first. Cinemas in the latter part of his childhood were magical but slightly grubby with sticky carpets, and décor beginning to fade. They weren’t being invested in.

As an adolescent, Simon went alone, his taste becoming more individual and discriminating. He followed the work of actors and directors he admired. Films viewed included “Escape from New York” and “The Thing.” He enjoyed Sci-Fi but around this time developed a life-long fascination with Horror.

He enjoyed the whole cinema programme including the local ads and the B film, often a wildlife film, eg about Wildebeeste. The local ads gave a community feel, inviting you to go to a nearby restaurant after the film. These ads were often scratchy from repeated showings. The main film was sometimes scratchy and marked depending how much it had gone the rounds before coming to Kingston.

The snacks available were Kia-Ora drink, Poppets and Toffets, also shown in ads. Ads for Kia-ora (viewable on Youtube) would not be considered OK now. He never heard or saw the Wurlitzer organ though he noticed the space for it.

His family were working class, affording the cinema as a non-luxurious treat. It was a socialist pursuit, available to anyone. You didn't have to dress up. He can't say what the prices were.

As a teenager, cinema wasn't a social experience. He preferred to concentrate on the film. He was outraged when in 87/88, the Granada got double seats for courting couples-you should be watching the film! He disliked it when the Granada changed to three screens. Screen1 (the old Circle) was OK but 2 and 3 were low-ceilinged shoe boxes.

He regrets the passing of cinemas and film experiences as they were in the past. Modern cinemas are hygienic and efficient. He isn't a fan of multiplexes. It's very expensive now, probably £60 for a family of five. Digital film is cleaner, cheaper, more consistent, but he hates it. His job at the BFI was to copy and restore old films. Seeing these films (for example early silent film) is a very different experience and he urges people to see these films when they can.

He occasionally goes to Kingston Odeon. He is pleased they hosted the Kingston International Film Festival recently. He watches movies at home (cheaper and a wider choice of films) or goes to cinemas showing genres and directors he is interested in, often films which don't achieve mainstream distribution.

He wasn't aware of Muybridge until after A levels, and then only tangentially. He learnt more about Muybridge as part of film studies and in his work at the BFI.

The experience of films and cinema going which started at Kingston Granada has led him to academic study of film and a career as a film historian and archivist. He currently teaches film studies at Kingston University.