

HASTINGS PIER CHARITY

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Hastings Pier and Cinema



An audience on Hastings Pier (HPC068.013)



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Hasting Pier and Cinema

Hastings Pier was opened in 1872. Projected entertainment at that time would have been magic lantern shows in church halls or theatres, and in people's homes.

On St Leonards Pier, a famous illusionist called Hercat was to present "The Cinematographe: living, moving pictures" on 7 November 1896, but it seems from a review in the local paper, that the films were dropped from the bill. A Centenary of Cinema Plaque was erected on the railings near the site of the now demolished pier (opposite the Queen Victoria Hotel), to commemorate the first film show, but this would now appear to be an incorrect dedication. Later, between 1907 and 1913, Jury's Imperial Pictures exhibited on St Leonards Pier.

However, evidence from the Hastings and St Leonards Observer for 9 November 1896, states that 'animated photographs' were presented successfully on Hastings Pier by GA Smith, an important film pioneer from Brighton. His shows advertised 'pictorial and dioramic tours'. It seems that films were shown on the Pier in the years 1911 - 1914 in the Hastings Pier Cinema Theatre, although we don't know much about what was screened. Famous shows which toured nationally, were booked at least once on the Pier before 1914.

West's "Our Navy". Animated pictures and lantern slide shows.
Poole's Diorama. A spectacular entertainment, with rolling scenes, sound effects, interspersed with moving pictures. Stories were told with 'unique Mechanical and Electric Effects ... special music and story described in a thrilling manner.'

A 1902 programme for The Empire Theatre of Varieties on Marine Parade (now The De Luxe). Among many other music hall acts, was The Edisonograph (nothing to do with the famous American Thomas Edison though), presenting eight films - it seems, a mixture of real events ('actualities') and humorous sketches: Coaling a Battleship Over the Garden Wall Fishing Extraordinary Washing the Fish Paris & Berlin Motor Car Race: Official Start Washing the Sweep Catching a Shark, I will not be Taken

A History of Cinema in Hastings

Before pictures were screened for an audience, there had been a 'peepbox' device called the Kinetoscope, where only one person could view a moving picture. In 1895, the Adelphi Hotel in Warrior Square opened a Kinetoscope Parlour. Another one opened in Robertson Street the same year.

Although scientists and inventors had been experimenting with various methods to produce moving pictures since around 1850, it wasn't until over 40 years later, that the public paid to see 'films' on a screen, firstly in America, then in Europe. It was in London on 9 March 1896, that the British public paid for the first time to see films. This programme of short films had been made by the French brothers, Auguste and Louis Lumiere.

There were no cinemas as such in the first years, but variety theatres often had 'animated pictures' on their bills. With their projection equipment and rolls of film, travelling showmen visited not only music halls, but set up in fairs or empty shops. In 1902, a Bioscope Show appeared in Priory Meadow - the Bioscope was another name for 'films' or 'cinema'.

It seems that in Hastings, a lot of entrepreneurs showed films from Blacklands to Ore, and from Bohemia to Wellington Square. But it wasn't until 1910, that purpose-built cinemas were catering for the public's enthusiasm for 'going to the pictures'. In 1913, St Leonards saw the first purpose-built cinema in the area. Called the Kinema Palace, it was situated between Norman Road and Shepherd Street.

In the latter years of the nineteenth century, Harry Furniss, a very popular cartoonist, lecturer and author, bought East Hill House, a property at the end of All Saints' Street, and set up a film studio at the back. He shot films of the Hastings Carnival Processions, which can be accessed through Hastings Museum. It's also possible that he actually showed films from 1902 to 1907, since there is a record of the East Cliff Electric and Bioscope at the address.

Initially, films were seen in black and white, although a few years later some were hand- coloured. Other pioneers were experimenting and patenting colour film processes from the beginning. There was no way at

the time to record sound on film, and so audiences watched 'silent' films, but often with sound effects operated from behind the screen. Titles appeared throughout the action - usually white lettering on a black background - so that the audience could follow the story. One might imagine the noise when the titles were read out loud for the benefit of those who couldn't read well enough. Many shows had piano accompaniment, and even today, famous classic silent films are screened with a full orchestra. Some theatres also had a 'describer' who told the story from the side of the stage.

Over the first two decades of the twentieth century, many people sought to add sound to film, but the difficulties were not overcome until around 1930. Once films were able to be shown with sound, many stars lost their jobs - the public could not endure some of the terrible voices coming out of their glamorous idols' mouths!

The very first films were short. A reel of film lasted less than a minute. The public were fascinated by seeing movement on a screen before them. Waves crashing against rocks, workers spilling out from factory gates, a horse race, a man smoking a cigarette. Gradually stories began to appear - a train robbery, a kidnapped baby, exploding cars - directors soon learnt how to create 'trick films' using double exposure, and stop and start motion. As the wooden cameras on their bulky tripods couldn't move while filming, each scene was viewed from one point only.

Light was important, and so filming had to be done in broad daylight. Interiors would be painted backcloths set up outside, creating living rooms, or pubs. The first studios either had an open roof to let the light in, or they had glass walls.

In the Edwardian period, audiences saw famous stage actors like Sarah Bernhardt in Shakespeare plays, well-loved music hall comedians such as Dan Leno enacting their hilarious routines, and romantic tear-jerkers which pulled in the crowds. But the names of many of the actors weren't publicised - the 'star' system had not yet arrived.

Because the actors' voices were not heard, the characters they were playing had to be accentuated with exaggerated gestures. We see the villain melodramatically twirling his large moustache, the pretty young

girl fluttering her eyelashes in alarm, signifying her fear with trembling hands, her dark painted lips open to scream.

Apart from these 'picture plays', people were also thrilled to see real events. Often these were rushed to venues by the next day. We know that Edward VII's coronation procession was shown on Hastings Pier by J. M. Glover's Royal Bioscope Show, probably the day after the king was crowned in Westminster Abbey in August 1902. Even Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897 had been filmed, and you can see extracts now online.

A cameraman might take pictures of a local fete, or perhaps a parade of Boy Scouts. An announcement would be made telling everyone to come to a showing that evening to witness themselves on screen. There were many other ideas to promote the cinema - free tea and biscuits, or free oranges. By the 1930s and 1940s, imaginative promotion might include the staff dressed in costume reflecting the film being shown, or a personal appearance of the stars themselves.

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