

# Memories of Fakenham's Cinemas

by Hubert Dunthorne

In the 1920s there were two cinemas in Fakenham commonly known as the 'top pictures' and the 'bottom pictures'. Top pictures was in the Electric Pavilion in Holt Road between Baxter's Garage and the railway bridge. Built as a Territorial Army drill hall, Could also be used as a dance hall. It was run by the Priest family. H & H Priest were stationers in Norwich Street (now Fakenham Optometrists). H. & H. (Horace and Herbert). Herbert Priest was Clark of the Parish Council with offices in Oak Street, part of Dr Palin's property, at south end of barn and coach house building (library side). The Parish Council met in the upper room from which the photograph of Oak Street (showing Dr Fisher's car was undoubtedly taken. (Postcard published by H& H Priest.)

The significance of the Electric Pavilion was that there was no mains electricity until the 1930s. Electricity for the projector and lighting of the cinema was generated by a stationary petrol engine. The silencer for this was buried in the ground near the side exit from the hall and boys had great fun putting their caps on top of the exhaust pipe to see them blow up into the air!

Silent films were accompanied by appropriate music provided by Mr. Applegate. At first all seating was on floor level but eventually a section of tiered seating was provided at the rear of the hall. The first 'talkies' came in about 1929-30. In the thirties it became the Regal, part of a chain of cinemas in Wells, Holt and so on. Living in what is now 23 Oak Street watching posters advertising the forthcoming attractions displayed on a large billboard on the street side of Herbert Priest's office.

The 'bottom pictures' were located in the former British School in Norwich Road next to the Bell Hotel. I can't recall its proper name. It was run by a Mr. Howell. I've a vague recollection of seeing *The Desert Song* (silent version) there. It closed as a cinema when A.W.J. Aldiss wanted to refurbish his shops in Upper Market. He gave notice to Mr. Howell but provided him with temporary accommodation in the Corn Hall which he also owned. Not very satisfactory as the natural lighting from the glass dome must have made it difficult in the summer. Aldiss's clothing and drapery store moved to Holt Rd for the time, after which the cinema did not return but the premises were let to Peacock's Bazaar.

In about 1930 the conversion of the Corn Hall into the Central Cinema took place. The Corn Hall contained a large main hall, extremely well lit by the glass dome, and high windows, and there were other rooms on two floors. The entrances were on the south east and north east corners only. The present main entrance was provided when the alterations were made for the cinema. (Is there not a picture somewhere of a meal being served in the Corn Hall for the men returning after the Great War?)

For the conversion into a cinema the main alterations were removal of the dome,. blocking or blacking out the windows on the north, west and south sides of the main hall and providing a new entrance to the foyer and box office on the east side. A projection room as built on this room and films were projected through the circular space left by the removal of the dome.

There were tiered seats at the rear beneath the balcony. I seem to recall the ticket prices were 1/6d ( one shilling and six pence in old money) for the balcony and 1/9d on the lower floor. Children could have quite a good seat for 6d

The Central Cinema was well attended in the thirties and forties and throughout the 1939-45 war but the advent of television led to its decline and eventual conversion to a bingo hall.

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