

## A CINEMA AT ELTHAM HILL

**A cinema visit for Eltham residents means a journey out of the area but until the mid 1960s we had a choice of three local locations to view the latest films from Hollywood and British studios. The last built of these cinemas, at Eltham Hill, is now used for bingo but seventy years ago it screened its first films.**

On the site stood an agricultural unit comprising an old farmhouse, with a bow-fronted windowed room by the front door, and outbuildings which for many years was the home of Frederick Smeech and his family.



Following demolition of 122 Eltham Hill a notice appeared on the site, early in 1937, stating that it was to be a 'Regal' cinema but during construction it was changed to the 'Forum' but on completion the 'Odeon' name had been chosen even though Eltham already had an Odeon at Well Hall which had opened two years earlier – both cinemas were designed by renowned architect Andrew Mather.



In some quarters the name **ODEON** is considered to be a short version of **Oscar Deutsch Entertains Our Nation** as a tribute to the man who established the chain of modern super-cinemas well-known for their lavish opening ceremonies, and the Odeon at Eltham Hill was no exception on Thursday 14 April 1938.

Every one of the 1705 seats was filled when the Mayor of Woolwich, Councillor PH Rance accompanied by the Mayoress Councillor Mrs Rance, declared the theatre open. Guests included Aldermen and Councillors of Woolwich Borough Council, representatives of the Eltham Chamber of Commerce, local Rotary clubs, the Eltham & Mottingham Cottage Hospital, the Territorial Army and the 338<sup>th</sup> Anti-Aircraft Company (Eltham) who had brought eight searchlights from their HQ at Southend Hall, Footscray Road, to project a fan of light over the outside of the cinema which had attracted the crowds who gathered to see the arrival of the principle guests. Inside selections of music were played by the band and pipers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the King's Own Scottish Borderers whose bright military uniforms added a colourful touch of pageantry to the proceedings and on stage a trumpet fanfare started the proceedings.

The mayor observed that the cinema was one of real beauty, in its colour scheme of aster shades and blue, with decorations of an artistic nature. Its well arranged seating capacity would give comfortable and luxurious accommodation for those who believed in the use of the cinema as a relaxation from the turmoil of present day life. Stanley Bates, a director of Odeon Theatres Ltd, read a telegram from Oscar Deutsch with the assurance that the high standard of entertainment set by other Odeons would be maintained at Eltham. Mr Bates further stated that everything from the floor to the roof was British. 'Attention to health was part of the Odeon high standard. If one entered the cinema with a streaming cold, the germs were snatched from one's lips and taken out



through the roof.' The Mayoress and Mrs Stanley Bates were the recipients of bouquets of flowers from a smartly dressed Odeon page boy.

A collection, raising £16, was taken by uniformed nurses on behalf of the Eltham & Mottingham Cottage Hospital which was followed by the first public screening of a Territorial Army recruiting film called Territorial Cavalcade.

With long and varied experience in the cinema business Mr S Corner was appointed as manager and with his staff oversaw the opening ceremony and the first film, Victoria the Great starring Anna Neagle as the Queen and Anton Walbrook as Prince Consort.

The Odeon proved a success with local audiences and despite difficulties during the Second World War continued to provide some relief for people suffering the privations of aerial attack and long hours at work and on public duty.

Early in 1945, when the war was still raging and V2 rockets were falling, Francis Minde arrived as the new manager with a background of press and publicity work in the film business. Through his showmanship and publicity stunts over the next seven years he was able to attract customers to his cinema at a time before TV began to cream off the audiences. Not a week went by when a press notice did not appear in the local papers about a new film release with a link up to a local shop which promoted the film and the shop business; staff and local people were persuaded to don costumes to promote films and local papers publicised these novelty stories. Stars visited the cinema to promote their films and other events including Mai Zetterling, Herbert Lom, Robert Beatty, Harry Fowler, Eric Barker, Pearl Hackney, Tommy Handley, Bonar Colleano and Frankie Howerd.



In July 1945 twenty Odeon Cinema Clubs were reopened whose activities had been suspended during the war as many children had been evacuated. Leslie Henson performed the opening ceremony at Eltham Hill accompanied by the Mayor of Woolwich, Councillor ET Lamerton, who reminded the children to be careful crossing the roads. So keen were the children to attend that some were lining up at 7.30am for the 9.30am start of the two and a half hour programme of films and community singing.

The writer remembers looking forward to this regular Saturday morning slot and queuing alongside the cinema by Eltham Hill School – on one occasion local tramp Smokey Joe was seen free-wheeling his tyre-less bicycle down the hill. Cowboy films including the antics of Roy Rogers and Deadwood Dick were interspersed with singing along to a song with the aid of a bouncing ball over the projected words. Children were encouraged to take part on Mr Minde's stunts and one day we went to Leeson's Hill, St Paul's Cray, to collect rose hips and on another occasion washed stones – whatever were they used for?

**ELTHAM GAUMONT HILL** ELT.3767

SUNDAY, SEPT. 12, FOR 1 DAY  
X THE UNKNOWN - Dean Jagger  
(X) Adults only . 6.0, 9.0  
Teenage Frankenstein (X) 4.30, 7.25

MONDAY SEPT. 13, FOR 6 DAYS  
PLEASE NOTE MATINEE DAYS  
AND TIMES

KIRK DOUGLAS, ANTHONY QUINN  
LAST TRAIN FROM GUN HILL  
Technicolor. Vistavision. (A)  
Carolyn Jones, Earl Holliman  
Daily 5.30, 9.05.  
Matinees Thurs. and Sat. 1.55

YUL BRYNNER  
ESCAPE FROM ZAHRAIN  
Technicolor. Panavision. (U)  
Co-starring Sal Mineo, Jack Warden,  
Madlyn Rhue.  
Daily 7.05. Mats. Thurs. & Sat. 3.30  
For Fun and Entertainment—Boys'  
and Girls' Club Saturday 9.30 a.m.

On Monday 28 November 1949 the cinema name was changed to Gaumont. The screening of films continued until 16 September 1967 with Happy Go Lovely and Duel in the Jungle being the last films shown. On 26 October that year the premises were reopened as a Top Rank bingo hall by comedian Tommy Trinder.

Wouldn't it be a treat to see films back on a big screen in Eltham!

John Kennett



All pictures are from the John Kennett collection

From the top:

(Odeon Eltham Hill) June 1947

The pay desk

Early days at the cinema in 1938

Francis Minde, centre second row, with staff

(Gaugmont) September 1965

Staff suitably attired to promote a film

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