

MAYFAIR THEATRE

The Mayfair Theatre was the fourth cinema theatre to open in New Plymouth and its recent closure, makes it the longest screening cinema in New Plymouth. During its long history it has undergone many changes including; a name change, building changes and style of film changes to name a few.

OPENING...Its history, known as Everybody's cinema at this stage, all began on the first screening on Friday December 15th, 1916. The opening night debut was deemed a great success, an article which appeared in the Daily News the next day read as follows...

"Patrons went away from Everybody's feeling that New Plymouth had a theatre that was the acme of perfection. Judging from the many commendatory remarks heard, the new theatre promises to become the rendezvous of a very wide circle of citizens and visitors."

The opening night programme was, after an overture by Everybody's Symphony Orchestra, a four-reeler called Nedra, adapted from a George Barr novel followed by a cartoon called 'Nanny Goat on the Rampage.' Interval was followed by another Orchestra piece before the five-reel feature film called 'Temptation,' starring Geraldine Farrar. A newspaper article of the time described it as;

"A story torn from real life, a story rich in human interest, a story that talks and tells, a story that will never grow old - vivid, crisp, bright, tragic and convincing."

HOW THE CINEMA CAME ABOUT...A man called Garnet Hornby Saunders who was born in Adelaide, Australia, 1880, arrived in New Plymouth in 1904 and was soon after active in founding cinemas in the North Taranaki District. By 1916 he was the director of Taranaki Amusements Ltd. a company formed by a small group of local businessmen. Mr. Saunders became the general manager of Everybody's Cinema, with a man called Brandon Haughton the projectionist, and the musical director was Mrs. A. George.

ARCHITECTURE... On February the 8th 1916 a building permit was issued to Taranaki Amusements Ltd. at the value of £5,283 from the New Plymouth Borough Council, for the building of the cinema behind shops in Devon Street Central, an area believed to be a quagmire at one stage. Soon after, the Regal Boot and Shoe Shop, owned by Goodacres, was demolished to make way for the long ascending entrance to the cinema. Everybody's, at its opening, was the town's finest building, with fluted plaster columns soaring towards the domed ceiling and gilded-lattice ventilation, with its comfortable seating, accommodating 631 and its soft lighting also drawing favourable mention. The builders were Mr. Sidney Chappell and partner Mr. Woolley. At its closure the Mayfair had 560 seats, (340 in the stalls and 220 in the circle.)

PRICES... Not surprisingly, Everybody's became somewhat more up-market than the other two cinemas (Peoples and Empire) all three of which were operating in New Plymouth, with a population of this time at 8700 at the end of 1916. On its opening night, seats in the dress circle were 1/- (one shilling) stalls 6d (six pence) with reserves 1/6 (shilling and sixpence) which was more than the other cinemas at this time.

TALKIES... The first talking picture was shown at Everybody's on September 7th 1929, a Saturday afternoon. The picture was the musical 'Show Boat.' Talkies marked the end of many careers of Hollywood heroes and heroines enjoyed by citizens of New Plymouth, when silent stars had their stutters, lisps or accents discovered by the introduction of 'Talkies.'

NAME CHANGE... On July the 29th 1938 its name changed from Everybody's Cinema to the Mayfair Theatre, this was only a change of name, not ownership etc..

INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL... One of the highlights in the Mayfair Cinema's year

was the International film festival held in conjunction with the Kerridge Odeon Corporation annually, starting in 1980. The festivals would screen a programme of international films from as many as fifteen countries. The festivals would run for around a week, and would attract viewers from all over Taranaki, and the North Island of New Zealand. Mr. Richard Weatherly was the Festival director for many years and Mr. Kerry Robins, who now runs the 'Paramount' in Wellington was also involved in its organisation.

ROBBERY... Trouble broke out on the night of Sunday December the 8th, 1991, when two armed men, their faces covered with balaclavas, entered the Mayfair theatre foyer at about 9 pm, just after the interval of the movie 'Naked Gun 2 1/2'. One of the men demanded money from a woman staff member and at the same time, another member of the staff, Ms Langman, was hit several times with an unidentified object by the other man. She managed to break free and ran up the stairs to where the movie was showing. At this time one of the robbers fired a shot from a shotgun, fortunately no one was injured by the blast.

The robbers who were given a reasonably small amount of money, (the safe had not been opened) then left the premises. Consequently, after the bashing, Sylvia Langman, aged 33, was escorted by ambulance officers to hospital, half an hour after the incident, where she had to have 20 stitches before being discharged. The audience of about 85 continued to watch the movie, oblivious to the commotion.

WIND DOWN... Prior to the Mayfair's closure a long string of events turned it into quite a tangled plot! It all started when the Mayfair Theatre failed to meet earthquake standards. After proposals to develop the Theatre into a multiplex didn't manifest, the New Plymouth District Council gave it a permit to remain initially open till May 1993, but applications to extend the permit a few times were accepted. Confusing the issue were owners, leaseholders, cinema chains, and the Multiplex saga that hit New Plymouth prior to the actual opening of Top Town Cinema 4.

OWNERSHIP... The Mayfair Theatre was owned (and established) by the company Taranaki Amusements Ltd. from when the company formed in the mid 1910's till the Mayfair was sold to a member of Taranaki Amusements Ltd. Mr. Jeremy Thomson and associate interest, Mr. Willy Still on the 17th of September 1993. Mr. Thomson and Mr. Still are not positive at the moment of what they will do with the Mayfair Theatre building and any suggestions I have heard are confidential, as is the price that was paid for the building. The final leaseholder for the cinema was Mr. Kerry Robins who is now operating the 'Paramount' in Wellington.

The Pacer Kerridge Cinema company and forbearers have been the film company that supplied the Mayfair with films from the beginning, thus have had a long relationship with Taranaki Amusements Ltd. This relationship was terminated just before Christmas 1992 when the Pacer Kerridge Cinema chain was placed in receivership, and bought in January by Everard Film Distributors. This company bought most of the cinema interests of Pacer Kerridge but opted not to buy the Mayfair. However the Everard Film Distributors were contracted to manage the business while a buyer was sought. This led to the following misunderstanding...

SECURITY GUARDS... On the 12th of February 1993, staff of the Mayfair arrived at the cinema to find the doors padlocked with a security guard posted out front. Once inside the building new leaseholder, Mr. Kerry Robins discovered a key part of the projector had been removed, which he promptly arranged replacing with a part from Te Awamutu.

Apparently Mr. McCloy associated with Everard Cinemas' had not been informed from owners, Taranaki Amusement Ltd., that his lease had been terminated and leasing rights had been given to Mr. Kerry Robins. Mr. McCloy denied any involvement with the padlocking of the building or security guard stationed outside, he said he believed the landlords were responsible.

The owners (Taranaki Amusements Ltd.) denied any involvement with the padlocking but claimed they had organised the posting of Security Guard out side.

The result of all this was the opening screening of the blockbuster film, 'The Bodyguard,'

scheduled at 5.45 pm was cancelled and the later screening of 9.00 pm didn't start till 11.15 pm for a large crowd.

THREE CINEMA PLAN... A proposal of \$2.3 million dollars was to redevelop the Mayfair into a three-cinema complex, to be renamed Zig Saunders Movies, in tribute to Garnet Hornby Saunders eldest son, believed to be a pioneer of movies, who died recently in September 1990.

The chairman of Taranaki Amusements Ltd. Mr. John Middleton said the redevelopment would be carried out from July and December 1992, and at least one cinema would always be operating apart from two weeks during that time.

The first area planned to be developed was the Spaceworld amusement parlour that would contain a 242 seat cinema.

Once that was completed the existing cinema was planned to develop into a 299 seat cinema in the existing stalls and a 180 seat cinema in the old circle area. All theatres were meant to provide a high-quality picture with comfortable surroundings.

The organisers were sure of the complex's success in the beginning, saying that a films popularity could be adjusted between the larger and smaller theatres and that similar ventures were proving profitable in Devonport (Auckland, which I've been to) Manukau City, Palmeston North and Christchurch.

Taranaki Amusements would take 30% of the shares but a new company would run the venture. Local architects Boon Smythe Goldsmith Cox Ltd. completed the design, working in conjunction with builder from Steele Construction Ltd.

The 77 year old building, rated a C classification by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust, meaning although regarded important in New Plymouth's heritage, the owner has no legal obligation to preserve it, was proposed to retain its exterior with just the inside refurbished and altered.

The new company's directors were to be Mr. Middleton and Mr. Jeremy Thompson from Taranaki Amusements Ltd. and to have a finance director from Telecom New Zealand International Ltd. and an executive director from Willis Bond & Co.

Unfortunately the proposal never got off the ground due to the announcement of the rivalry plans of Top Town Cinema 4 proposal v the Multiplex planned for Powderham Street. Consequently the Mayfair Theatre stands empty today, and will remain so until its owners decide on its fate.

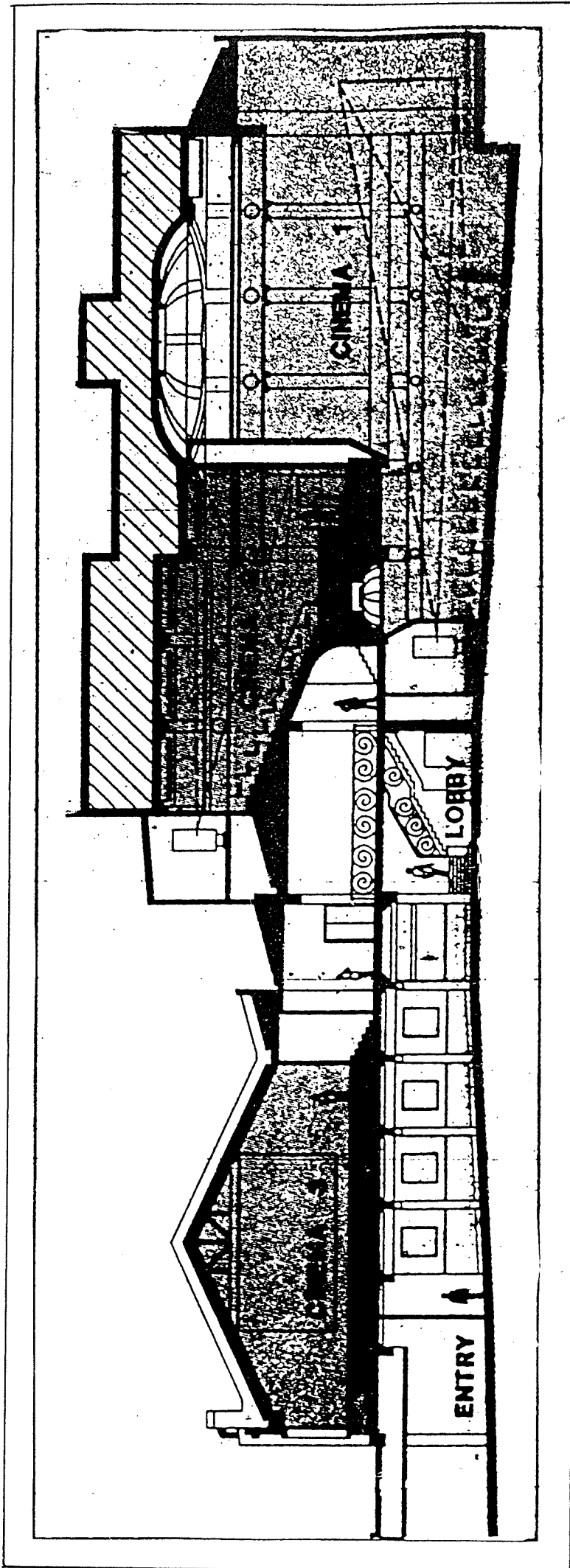
EXTENDED CUT OFF DATE... The final cut off date, regarding the Mayfair building not having earthquake requirement status, was extended many times by the New Plymouth District Council, due to the need of at least one cinema facility operating in New Plymouth prior to the opening of Top Town Cinema 4 which kept on being delayed. The final cut off date was extended from May 1993 to July 1993, and after a request to stay open from Taranaki Amusements Ltd. due to attendances going up 200% in school holidays, the Mayfair was allowed to remain operational during the August School holidays and then up to the opening of the new cinema complex.

JURASSIC PARK... However sad the closing of the Mayfair was at least it went out with a boom. Kerry Robbins, the final lease holder of the cinema, managed to combine permission of keeping the Mayfair Theatre operating, with getting the viewing rights of Jurassic Park, the Steven Speilburg blockbuster.

The movie, alternating with the movie Aladdin, screened continuously through the day to maximum capacity crowds. Viewers had to book seats well in advance to be sure of having a seat. Many people went also as a last pilgrimage to the Mayfair before its old-fashioned layout was overtaken by the Top Town Cinema 4 complex, scheduled at opening soon.

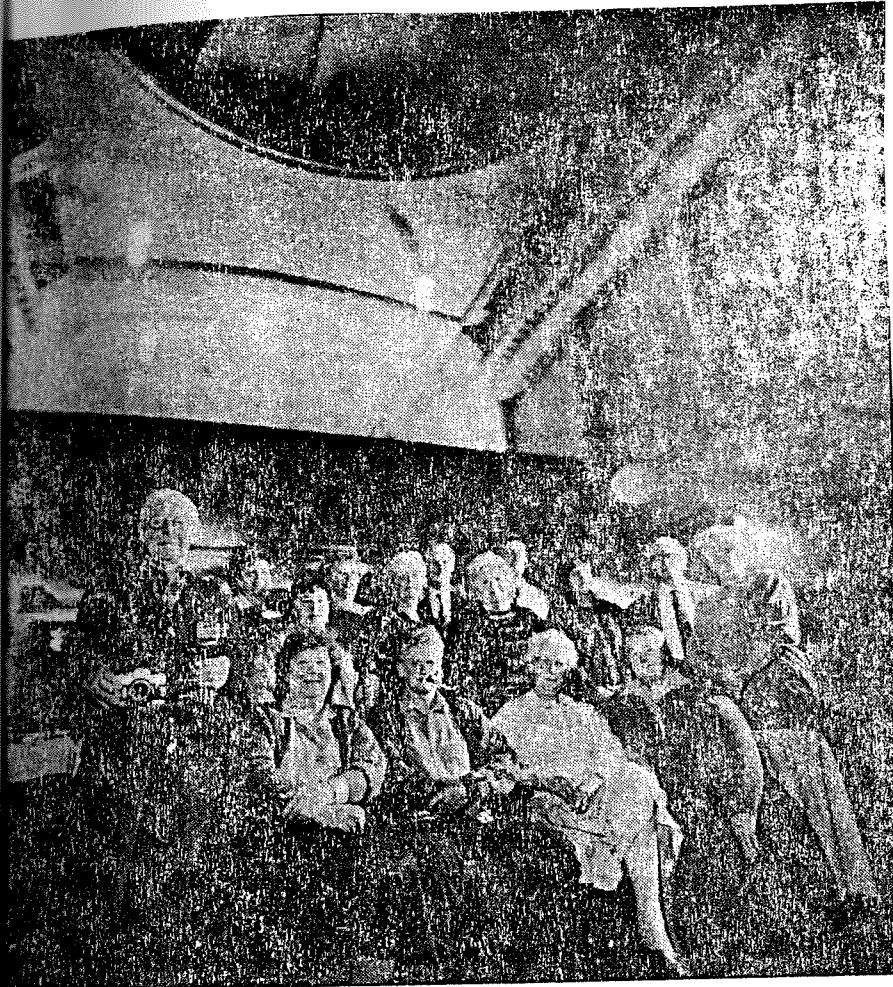
CLOSING... Sadly, although I am unsure of the exact date, I believe the Mayfair had its last screening in September/October 1993, the last of New Plymouth's old cinemas to do so.

During its time as a cinema, the Mayfair Theatre underwent many, many changes. It saw the transition of the old orchestra, accompanied silent films, to the introduction of



PROPOSAL FOR CINEMA'S MULTIPLEX
MAYFAIR THEATRE ...
1992

'talkies,' to the blockbuster "Jurassic Park" type movies of today. The building also underwent changes, going from being highly thought of as a fine, grand building to a ramshackle that failed its earthquake safety test. The Mayfair has seen the change from different prices of men and women or ladies and gentlemen as it were, to the equality of today. I believe the Mayfair has changed considerably in its time and has had quite an influence on the lives of New Plymouth citizens.



REUNION: Former Mayfair staff are planning a reunion at next Saturday's annual night. Back row, left, Janice Smith, Gail Coates, Merv Thayer, Murray Smith, Denise Campbell and Jack Valentine; (middle row) Sylvia Langman, Jan Grady and Doris Smyth; (front row) Caleb Wyatt, Dale Sparrow, Doug Sparrow, Marie Wardlaw, Joan Hamblyn and Carol Manceicao.
Photo: ADRIAN MALLOCH

BY IT WAYS...
R OF THE MAYFAIR

