

EMPIRE THEATRE

The Empire Theatre was the second establishment to screen film here in New Plymouth. In 1910, a man called Mr. Fred Bellringer of the Company Bellringer Bros. had the Empire Theatre built. This building on the 'Hill' of Devon Street, between ~~Courteney~~ *Currie* and Liardet Streets, on the sea side, still stands today. Converted into two shops, now known as Complex 33 (Artemis) and the Champions Wool Shop, is where the Theatre used to be.

DEVELOPMENT... The builder was Mr. Russell Greirson. ~~Timer~~ *Timer* and Architects, AUCKLAND, had connections but mainly was involved in the alterations and improvements made in 1916. Two Chinamen's shops were demolished to make way for it.

OPENING SCREENING...Taranaki Amusements Ltd. with Mr. Garnet Hornby Saunders as the general manager at the time, leased the theatre off the Bellringer Estate, and after the first screening there on December the 23rd 1911, it became the towns first all-cinema picture house, although it did have a small stage.

It seated 543, with 362 of those in the stalls and 181 in the gallery. Because of the fire risk of the dangerous, ~~self igniting~~ nitrate film, the projection booth was on the outside of the front wall, above the street footpath verandah. The entrance to it was up a ladder and through a trapdoor in the floor. Large murals adorned the walls, showing such people as Thomas Edison.

LOCAL FILM MAKING...One of the main attractions of the Empire Theatre to the public was the local moving pictures screened there on Saturday nights. Mr. Garnet Hornby Saunders, who was manager of the Theatre at the time, and a man called Mr. Brandon Haughton, who ran the professional photographic studio, on the west side of the Theatre, (he was also a city projectionist) together they used to make local films. Mr. Saunders, in his open-air car, would drive while Mr. Haughton cranked the handle of the camera in the back. They would film the race meetings, sports events, beach scenes, the mountain track up at North Egmont; basically anything that moved. The developing and printing of these films would take place in the small rooms in the rear of the Empire Theatre and every Saturday night they would be screened. They proved to be very popular as people would crowd in to see themselves on the screen.

Years later, when both Mr. and Mrs. Saunders had died and their son was overseas fighting in the war, the films were found wasting in the out-house of their Fillis Street house. The Regent projectionist at the time, Mr. Caleb Wyatt, found these films, some of which had turned to liquid, some to dust, (the old nitrate film didn't have a very long life) and gave them to the film archives in Wellington. They made the negatives into 16mm acetate film and the remaining pictures were screened twice in New Plymouth in the ~~State Hotel~~ *insurance Theatre*. Once for the public and once for the industry.

CLOSURE... Although the exact closing date I am yet to discover, it is known that the Empire Theatre never showed 'Talkies' which came to New Plymouth in the 1930's. The theatre was still screening pictures up to October 1925 and probably closed prior to 1930.

FIRE... On the 24th of February 1930 there was a fire in the Empire, the extent of the fire, I also don't know, but around about this time, Gilmours had a mart in it.

OWNERSHIP...On October the 16th 1968, it was taken over by a ~~Mr. Holdings~~ *W.H Jackson Holdings*. In May 1976 it was transferred to Millers Ltd. and in September 1981, it was bought by Mr. Richard Eric Gibson (a farmer) and Mr. Alan Gibson (builder,) both from Hawera as tenants with equal shares. As far as I know they still own it today.

30

The Empire Theatre didn't undergo many changes (although it did have some minor alterations in 1916,) this was because it remained only screening silent movies in the duration of its operation which was only about 20 years. It has changed ownership several times, and the fire of 1930 would have altered it also.



WHAT THE EMPIRE THEATRE LOOKS LIKE
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