

# REGENT THEATRE

The Regent Theatre stood where the Govet-Brewster Art Gallery stands today. It underwent many changes through its time until it was closed and the Art Gallery took over the building.

In the very beginning the site on Queen Street, was said to be occupied with a reed hut, the home of the Rev. Richard Ward, which served as a church on Sundays. Later the Primitive Methodists built their chapel there in 1862. This was demolished and a bigger church was built in 1904. This closed at the end of 1914.

Local businessmen (Mr. H.R Dingle as secretary) formed People's Pictures Ltd. and purchased the church, thus "People's Pictures" was the Cinema's first name, officially given in 1918.

A building permit was taken out on December the 22nd 1914 and alterations of £800 (pounds) took place, with another permit on September 6th for £3,400. Architects were Sandford and Griffiths and builders were firstly Shaw and Payne and secondly Robert and Son.

OPENING... People's Pictures had its first screening, in the church, on the Saturday of February the 12th, 1916, with the audience sitting in pews. Approximately 500 people were turned away. The feature picture was silent, it was called "Hearts In Exile" with actress Clara Kimball Young. The prices for the evening were; Ladies 6d (six pence) Gentlemen 1/- (one shilling.) This was also the price to reserve a seat. The matinee prices were 6d for gentlemen and 3d for ladies. The manager at this time was Mr. F C. Oldershaw.

PRESENT BUILDING... The building that still stands today, was built around the church (huge concrete walls) while screenings continued. Screenings only stopped for a short time when the church was demolished. They then put a roof on the building. The sloping church floor remained until it began to deteriorate and was replaced in the early 1930's. The picture screen was painted on the end wall.

EQUIPMENT... Up till 1920, when a second projector was built, a lot of people used to get annoyed when the projectionist had to change the reel after every 20 odd minutes, but with two projectors the picture could be kept going without so many breaks.

COMFORT... Although the audience's comfort was taken into account the same wasn't so for the projectionist. In the early days of the cinema the projectionist room was so small that when the projectionist had to change the reel of film, which was quite often, his bottom would stick out the doorway for all to see. There was at one stage little holes for the projectionist to see the picture through, but the smell from the audience, especially if it had been raining, was too much that the holes were eventually filled in with glass. However the projection room of the Regent Theatre which was situated high above the town has meant projectionists have seen some funny things from their vantage point.

SOUND ACCOMPANIMENT... Prior to 'talking pictures' the Regent had a resident pianist, unlike some theatres which had an entire orchestra. She would watch the screen and play music that suited the action. Silent films required continuous music with appropriate changes in mood and tempo. After the introduction of 'talkies' the Regent Theatre played records in accompaniment, but this proved to be a complete waste of time as the audience made too much noise.

TALKIES... Without missing any silent screenings a Western Electric sound system was installed. Subsequently, on the evening of Friday the 8th of November 1929 the first "talkie" programme was screened. With the advent of talkies, for a very long period of time, queues of patrons from the theatre, which seated 845, went well along Devon Street. This resulted in Share-holders receiving the highest dividend ever paid in New Zealand at that time of 23%.

NAME CHANGE... On Saturday May 24th 1930 the name was changed to the "Regent Theatre."

SCREENINGS... The screenings that the Regent Theatre had were as follows; matinees at 2.00 pm and 7.30 or 8.00 pm screenings. The most popular were the children's Saturday matinee and Friday and Saturday evenings. The Regent only screened films three times in total, apart from a few which had return screenings, especially the film 'Wizard of Oz,' starring Judy Garland, which is remembered as the most successful movie the Regent Theatre ever had, due to attendances and repeat screenings.

AUDIENCES... Going to the movies was considered by many people to be 'a big night out, a treat for the whole family,' as it was the only regular entertainment and people used to dress up to go and watch a film at the Regent. Many people used to book seats permanently for Friday and Saturday night, irrespective of what was showing. It was also popular with young couples, especially the back row of the circle.

RATS!... On two widely spread occasions, a troop of about eight or ten rats, who, every night for several months after the show had finished, would come in from outside the theatre into the back wall and along the ceiling, out behind the projection room switch board and when in the circle they would follow the people down the circle and start eating the ice cream cones left behind. About half an hour later they would all troop back the way they came.

FURTHER ALTERATIONS... Later a small stage was built and used for political meetings, and for "It's In the Bag" and for the young New Zealanders Club on Saturday mornings.

CLOSURE... Unfortunately, due to the introduction of television, the Regent Theatre fell victim and closed officially on Saturday night, June 27th 1964. There were only a few private screenings afterwards for the Chinese Society.

ART GALLERY Apart from the Chinese Society the Regent Theatre remained unused for several years until 1966, when the New Plymouth District Council purchased the Regent Theatre for \$20,000 and an adjacent property, which firstly used to be the Parsonage for the church and later owned by the White Hart Hotel, as the residency of the female staff, for \$16,000. It was then developed into the Govet Brewster Art Gallery, named after Mrs. Monica Brewster, and family, who were the driving force behind its development. The Gallery officially opened on Sunday afternoon the 22nd of February 1970, marking the complete end of the Peoples Pictures/Regent Theatre.

The cinema underwent many changes in its time, including a name change. (Peoples Pictures to the Regent Theatre which it is remembered as today.) It also underwent many building changes from church to the building of today, including many changes of the projection box. The Regent Theatre saw the marked arrival of the prosperous "Talking Movies" as well as the ill-prosperous arrival of Television, which marked its conclusion. It began to see the transfiguration from the cinema being an entertainment facility seen solely for the family enjoyment, to the 'friends' and 'couples' pattern of today. Thus I believe the Regent Theatre had a big part to play in the changing of New Plymouth's Cinema Industry.