

ENTERTAINMENT IN AYLESBURY IN THE 1920s

On looking through the late Professor Bill Mead's schoolboy diaries for 1928 - 1930 (part of a collection bequeathed to BAS Library), I found an interesting glimpse into entertainment in Aylesbury in the late 1920s .

Bill, who would have been 13 years old in 1928, made daily entries in his diaries recording when he went to school, meetings with friends, comments on any extreme weather conditions and nature notes. A keen gardener from an early age he often worked in the garden before and after school and recorded in his diaries details of the plants and bulbs which he had purchased. He also tipped in newspaper cuttings of national historical events.

However the most detailed entries cover entertainment. Bill sometimes with friends, or family, went to the cinema or the theatre in Aylesbury, and occasionally in London, as frequently as twice a week. The entries for February 1928 e.g. 14/2 'To Pavilion in the evening to see *The Golden Clown*'; 16/2 'To Pavilion in the evening to see *Mother Machree*'; 20/2 'To Pavilion in the evening to see *His Lady*'; 23/2 'To varieties at Market Theatre'. He listed every film or other entertainment which he went to together with the dates. Most of the films were adventures e.g. *Prisoner of Zenda*, *Huntingtower* or *Merry Widow*. Others had rather more lurid titles such as *Easy virtue*, *In the shadow of the harem* or *Variety girl* which do not sound like family entertainment to modern ears! Until 1929 of course all the films would have been silent, and black and white. Bill records the first talking picture which he saw at the Market Theatre on 19/9/1929.

Bill's book 'Aylesbury in the 1920s, together with entries in Directories, provide details of these halls of entertainment. The Grand Pavilion cinema was opened in 1925, with a seating capacity of 800, at 36-38 High Street on the site of the yard of Ward & Cannon, builders, coal & coke merchants & brick manufacturers. The proprietor was C.H.Senior who described the building as one of the most modern and finest cinemas in the provinces. There were continuous evening performances from 6.00 to 10.30 with matinees on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Usherettes with flashing torches led the way to the seats and a commissionaire paced down the aisle to draw the curtains that covered the screen followed by a pianist with a sheaf of music. At the matinees on Wednesdays and Saturdays tea and cakes were served to the patrons of the balcony or refreshments were taken after the performance at the Betty Martin cafe next door. The tall facade, which made the building stand out from the rest of the street, can still be seen today.

The Aylesbury Market Theatre, owned by the Aylesbury Electric Theatre Company Ltd., stood a little way up a narrow passage beside the Green Man public house on the Market Square. It was opened in 1911 with 400 seats but was destroyed by fire in 1924. It was rebuilt and re-opened later that year with 650 seats. As well as being a cinema it was the home of travelling repertory companies, variety acts and the annual pantomime. It had twice nightly performances at 6.30 and 8.30 with matinees on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Prices were 3d for the Pit, 6d for Stalls and 9d and 1/- for the Balcony. Programmes were changed on Mondays and Thursdays. Bill records that by the time the Theatre had been rebuilt the first version of *Ben Hur* was circulating. A great fuss was made about the film. There were life-sized portraits of the actors in the passage way. An "augmented orchestra" was also advertised. Bill was disappointed to find that these words meant no more than that to the customary piano were added a trumpet, drums and a violin. All the episodes covering the chariot race were accompanied by the overture to *The Marriage of Figaro* (which remained the incidental music to "Ben Hur" for many years). The Theatre was unfortunately demolished in the 1980s.

The Town Hall also acted as a cinema several times a week. Rows of wooden chairs provided uncomfortable seating on the ground floor, with three more rows in the balcony. Tickets were torn off rolls suspended above the cashier in the pay box - 6d for downstairs, 9d and 1/3 for upstairs. Lantern slides, always the same, advertising businesses in the town preceded the black and white silent films. There was rarely a full house and a lot of noisy scuffling among the cheaper seats. All in all Bill found it rather a bleak place in comparison to the comfort of the Pavilion.

All the diaries are now part of the BAS archive collection and can be consulted on application to the Hon. Librarian.

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