

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Basil Abbott, The Old Cinema, Diss

Basil Abbott evoked nostalgic memories for his audience at the April meeting of the Heritage Circle when he talked about the history of the Old Cinema in Diss and the films that would have been shown there before its closure in March 1973. He had been a regular customer from 1954.

The cinema was located in Victoria Road, Diss, and the site is now occupied by Hughes Electricals. It was an art deco building which opened in 1934. However, there was an earlier cinema from 1915 on a nearby site which would have shown silent films starring artists like Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd and Lillian Gish. The films of Helen Sacrifice were very popular even though they were very short, with some only 12 minutes in length. She made action films, *The Hazards of Helen*, where she did most of her own stunts. Basil Abbott interviewed Ethel Rumsby who played the piano to create the atmosphere for silent films in the cinema in Diss. She was paid 5/- (25p) a night and 2.6d (12.5p) on a Saturday afternoon.

After 1927 there were talking pictures which ended the silent film era. The first talking picture was *The Jazz Singer* with Al Jolson. It was thought to be 'a miracle' at the time. However, there was an initial problem as some local people could not understand the accents of the American film stars.

The new cinema opened in 1934. It had mostly individual chairs but there were double seats in the back row. A variety of films were shown. From 1928 there were Mickey Mouse cartoons from Walt Disney, along with gangster films with stars like James Cagney. *Gone with the Wind* was released in 1939 and was extremely popular. It won 10 Oscars.

The cost of visiting the cinema rose dramatically at the start of World War II when the entertainment tax was increased by 66%. Tickets were priced at 1/6d (7.5p), 1/- (5p), 9d (4p) and 6d (2.5p) in May 1940 but the best seat price became 2/3d (11.5p), with other seats available at 1/9 (9p) and 1/- (5p) by September 1940. However, audiences were maintained.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s the USA became involved in the Cold War against the Soviet Union. There were concerns about the influence of Communists in the film industry. Many actors and directors were 'blacklisted' and the nature of films changed. Horror films and others about alien invasions had the underlying theme of threat and menace.

During the 1950s and 1960s war films and westerns were very popular. They included *The Dambusters* and *The Bridge over the River Kwai*. They were inspiring stories but had very little connection to reality or the true events that they were based upon. Many people have fond memories of going to Saturday morning pictures at this time.

The Old Cinema in Diss closed on 3 March 1973. The last film shown was a double bill, *The Voyage of the Beagle* about the discoveries of Charles Darwin and *How to Steal a Diamond* starring Robert Redford. Basil Abbott was part of an audience he estimated at 40 people on the last night. The cinema was derelict for a period of time and narrowly avoided demolition before being taken over by Hughes Electricals. Diss Museum has some exhibits linked to the cinema, including the box office glass.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be on Wednesday 28 June at 7.30pm at Rickinghall Village Hall when Graeme Simmonds will give a talk entitled *History beneath your feet: Metal detecting, finds and more*. New members and visitors are welcome. Further information is available at www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy