

Guernsey's Cinemas

The cinema as we know it today developed from theatre or music halls which provided live entertainment for hundreds of years in the form of plays, musicals, and a wide selection of “variety acts”. Guernsey was hosting silent films in 1896 and “talkies” followed not long after their creation in around 1929.



Names such as the Lyric Hall, Central Hall, The People's Palace (also known as Billy Bartlett's or The Flea Pit), St. Julian's Hall (later The Gaumont) and the North Cinema were all familiar to the Guernsey public from the late 1920s and early 1930s onwards. One of the biggest, the Regal Cinema, was built in 1937 in inimitable Art Deco style and re-named the Odeon in 1948. There, one could still buy ice-cream, pop-corn and hot-dogs from usherettes in the interval up until its closure in 1980.

People may also just remember films being shown at venues such as Rectory House (in Market Square) and The Empire Theatre (St. Sampson's Electric Theatre) which was open for live acts and films from 1912.

All of Guernsey's cinemas were closed after the air-raid on St. Peter Port on 28th June 1940 by the German Luftwaffe, but were re-opened shortly after the Island was occupied by German forces. At the Regal, German films were initially shown on 2 nights every week, but by the end of 1941 the programme was exclusively German.

After the war the cinemas which remained in operation were the Odeon, Gaumont and the North Cinema. The Lyric was used as a film venue for British Forces until it was converted into a billiard hall in 1951. By the 1950s, films were being produced in glorious “technicolour” and the problems caused by inflammable celluloid film were overcome thanks to the use of the safer acetate medium.



Following the launch of BBC television in 1936 cinema had a fight on its hands. Because of the slow development of this medium, cinema held its audience appeal until well into the 1970s. However, with Sony's introduction of the Betamax home Video Cassette Recorder in 1974 the general public were suddenly able to enjoy the luxury of private home viewing. This, coupled with improved broadcasting and television quality, heralded the down-turn in attendance figures at the cinema.



The North Cinema closed in around 1957 but the Gaumont and Odeon soldiered on. The Gaumont continued its development which culminated in the introduction of a second screen in 1980. But with the competition from home viewing, Guernsey found it impossible to sustain both cinemas, and so the Odeon closed its doors in the same year and was sold to the States of Guernsey for £300,000.

Fighting against the convenience of rental and retail video, the Gaumont eventually closed its doors in January 1985. In the void left by the disappearance of the last two cinemas, Beau Sejour Leisure Centre continued to show films in its theatre auditorium. It wasn't until 1993 that local business felt that there was sufficient interest again to merit the opening of dedicated cinema screens on the Island. In that year the Mallard Double Bill Cinema opened with 2 screens, and 2 more were added in 1994. With the improvements in auditorium design, digital surround sound and CGI technology (Computer Generated Imagery) cinema has again become popular – not least because these visual and audio advances are best enjoyed and appreciated on a large screen rather than on a home television.