

REEL LEWES: STORIES ABOUT THE BIG SCREEN

Ruth Thomson

Inspired by the development of Lewes' new three-screen community cinema, Depot, 45 years after the closure of the last one, Reel Lewes, a group of local film-makers and researchers, has been investigating previous cinemas in the town.

In particular, many Lewesians affectionately remember two long-gone picture houses: the De Luxe and the Odeon. The older one, which opened on School Hill in 1913, was the poky de Luxe, better known as the 'bug-hutch'.

"It was very tatty and old fashioned. If you sat in the front row, you had to lean your neck backwards to look at the screen." (Maureen Burrow)

Cinema de Luxe was run by Reggie (Fatty) Briggs, the larger-than-life manager, assisted by a fierce usherette, who patrolled the aisles for miscreants and sprayed the cinema with a flit-gun. Mr Briggs generously offered free film shows to schoolchildren on special occasions; made his own movies of public events in Lewes, then showed them in the cinema; and treated the racing fraternity to private screenings of the Grand National before the advent of TV.



By comparison, the Odeon in Cliffe High Street, which opened in 1934, was a 'dream-palace', decorated in Art Deco style, with a smart cafe-restaurant. By far the biggest building in Lewes, it held almost 1,000 people and ran a very popular Saturday morning Children's Cinema Club.

"The whole noise level was shocking...When the lights went down, the children suddenly got quiet, because you knew you were in for something exciting on the screen." (Susan Trigwell)

Reel Lewes has compiled people's cinema-going memories into a film, *Big Screen Memories*, to be shown at Depot, 27 May to 30 June. There is also a book, *Screen Stories - Lewes goes to the pictures*, published by the Lewes History Group and available from 27 May. The book will be sold at Depot, at Lewes History Group meetings and via www.leweshistory.org.uk/screen-stories/.

More information about Depot, which opens on May 27th, can be found on its website www.lewesdepot.com.

Photo credit: Cinema de Luxe on School Hill 1928. Courtesy of Cinema Theatre Association