

The Picture- Palace: Its coming and going

Roy Day

On December 28th 1895 Auguste and Louis Lumière, two brothers from Lyons in France, presented a public performance of their Cinématographe film projector in Paris. The place was the basement of the Grand Café, 14 Boulevard des Capuchines, where there were seats for one hundred people, the admission charge was one franc and the show lasted half an hour. The first day thirty-three people went. Three weeks later the Lumiere brothers were taking over two thousand francs each day and there were queues outside. This was the start of a world-wide industry which by 1955 was catering for 1200 million film fans a year in Britain alone and which has left industrial archaeological remains all over the country, Bristol being no exception.

The Cinématographe was a small wooden box which served as both camera and a component of the projection system. It used perforated 35mm film and moved this through the 'film-gate' by means of a claw mechanism similar to that used in a sewing machine. The 1895 programme comprised twelve short sequences which had been shot by the Lumiere brothers themselves. Amongst their tea party and bathing scenes were two films of IA interest, one showing a steam train entering a station and another of operations at a forge with hot iron being quenched and steam rising in a 'most natural manner'. From the emergence of a practical photographic process in 1839 there had been considerable activity to turn this invention in the direction of animated or moving pictures. Dozens of patents were filed and many prototypes produced. Possibly the best of these was Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope which had been assisted by the appearance of George (Kodak) Eastman's celluloid roll-film (1889). The Kinetoscope was patented in America in 1891 selling over a thousand machines by 1894.

Kinetoscope viewing parlours appeared in North America and Europe and it was one of these that Antoine Lumière, Auguste and Louis's father, visited in Paris in 1894. He was impressed with what he saw but thought that the fact that clients needed to queue and then place a coin into a slot to peer individually for a mere twenty seconds was a disadvantage. Film **projection** to an audience seemed to him to be a better commercial proposition. He returned home to Lyons and told his sons that if they could devise a method of projecting moving images enabling an audience to sit and watch in comfort, they would achieve greater success. If in addition the family firm were able to produce films which would fit their own machines and Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope, he would soon be able to retire, grow vines and live 'the good life'!

The brothers must have been inspired to act quickly for by February 1895 the Cinématographe had been patented in France. There was a demonstration at a photographic industry lecture in Paris on March 22nd which was warmly received and the two brothers probably realised that their father's predictions could prove correct. The remaining months of 1895 were spent building up a small library of

films, giving local demonstrations, and preparing for the Paris premiere. Their reputation gained them early commercial credibility. Before 1895 had ended they had signed an agreement with the chemical manufacturing company Planchard to produce 35mm film at Lyons and had ordered two hundred Cinématographe machines from the engineering concern of Jules Carpentier. They also sought overseas agents and by March 9th 1896 a Lumière film show was part of the programme at the Empire Theatre of Varieties, Leicester Square, London. It played to packed houses for over a year.

In 1894 also, Robert Paul, a London instrument maker, had formed a partnership with photographer Birt Acres, and by January 1896 Paul was demonstrating a 'kinetic lantern' to the Royal Photographic Society. It used Edison Kinetoscope film and was received with enthusiastic applause. By March 1906 the Robert Paul Animatograph (which was what he eventually called it) was showing at the Alhambra Theatre of Varieties, Leicester Square (just across the road from the Empire) and made Paul a profit in his first year of £12,838 and a return on capital of 1,200%.

These early demonstrations held in existing theatres and music-halls resulted in the emergence of an embryo film-making industry whilst in 1898 A C Bromhead and T A Welch started the Gaumont Film Distribution Company. In 1903 Bromhead opened the Daily Bioscope Theatre in Bishopsgate Road, London and the following year The Theatre Royal, the first building converted for permanent moving picture display was opened at Attercliffe, Sheffield. Locally the small Tivoli Theatre in Broadmead, Bristol is thought to have been the first music-hall to include a film-show in its programme and, from June 8th 1896 the audience was treated to a succession of short films including one showing a re-enactment of the first dental extraction under gas. Possibly of greater interest is the fact that Horace Livermore, builder of the Peoples Palace (later to be the Gaumont Cinema) in Baldwin Street which showed films from October 1896, is rumoured to have been to a Lumière show in Paris earlier that year.

These early film-shows were short additions to a conventional theatre or music-hall programme but their popularity very soon indicated the need for halls where films could form the complete entertainment. Apart from syndicated films distributed nationally, local photographers, for example, Dunscombes and Husbands in Bristol, made films of regional interest, such as those of workers from factories of Wills or Frys, going home at the end of a day's work, or Bristol football matches. All proved to be popular in this interim period when there was a public fascination in moving pictures. At Bristol both the Colston Hall and the Victoria Rooms were soon called into use. In October 1901 the Colston Hall was booked for a six week film season and after four weeks, it is reported, 140,000 people had paid for admission which emphasised the potential of moving



Vestry Hall, built in 1880, a cinema from 1909. 95 years old.



The Coliseum, first an exhibition hall, now owned by the University of Bristol. 73 years old.



The Kingsway, now a motor-car dealers. 57 years old.



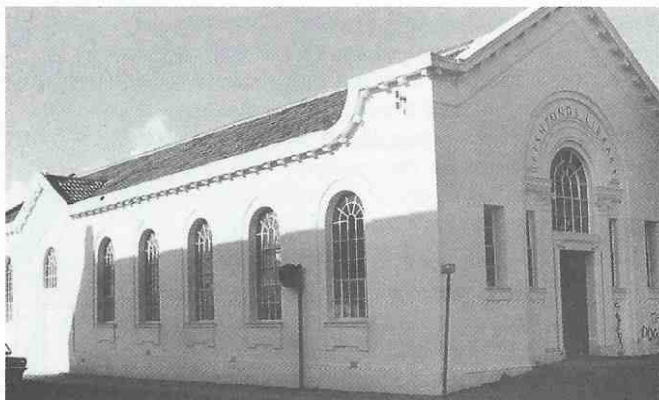
The Cabot at Filton, still cinema-shaped outside 52 years old.



The Academy/Plaza. 71 years old.



Bristol North Baths where films were shown during the winter months. 63 years old.



Fishponds Public Library, a short lived cinema, graceful at 74 years old.



The Metropole, restyled but underneath, 72 years old.

pictures as a money-making business. It also highlighted the need for clear thinking on crowd control, for in April 1897 there had been a tragedy in Paris, at the Bazaar de la Charité when a fire during a film performance had swept through the hall killing one hundred and eighty people. George Eastman's flexible celluloid film-stock was fiercely inflammable, indeed under uncontrolled storage conditions it became potentially explosive.

Within a few years there seems to have been a diminution of film-show audiences as, possibly, the novelty wore off. Very likely the cinema-going public became disenchanted with the odd scraps of topical films and a hotch-potch of so-called main films. Whatever the reason the resurgence of film-going took place fairly slowly and in Bristol there were seven new picture-palaces opened between 1908 and 1910 compared with thirty-five in the whole period between 1908 and 1916. This pause gave local and national government a chance to formulate safety regulations for people exposed to the hazards of motion-picture projection, and in 1909 action was taken.

The first Cinematograph Act became law from 1 January 1910, making obligatory the licensing of buildings used for public display of moving films. It also laid down minimum standards for fire protection and for the systematic evacuation of the audience in the event of an accident. This meant that anyone intending to earn their living from the showing of films had to notify the local licensing authority and put their 'picture-house' in order as far as the new regulations were concerned. Fire fighting requirements were comparatively modest, as a damp blanket, two buckets of water plus one of sand satisfied officialdom. The means of preventing fire spreading and evacuating people in a rapid manner proved more complex and far more expensive. A separate fire-resistant projection booth was mandatory as were controlled projection ports, and an automatically-operating protective shutter sealing off the danger areas, whilst a number of emergency exits had to be of a specified minimum width. The costs of conversion to these standards for an existing building was considerable. In the majority of cases it was more realistic to construct a purpose-built cinema.

This situation marked the start of cinema building and, incidentally, enabled future cinema historians to measure much more accurately the expansion of the motion-picture industry. Anyone carrying out conversion work or submitting a new building for the purposes of giving public displays of films had to have the results inspected and be issued with a licence. Thus we know that between January 1st and December 31st 1910, the London County Council issued two hundred licences within the area of their jurisdiction whilst the *Kiné Year Book* records that in 1913 the Manchester area, apparently one of the country's pioneering cinema districts, already had one hundred and eleven licensed halls. Charles Anderson, the Bristol cinema historian, has calculated that there were twenty-two operating cinemas in Bristol by the end of the same year. The five hundred seater Queen's Hall in Peter Street (a site now buried in Castle Park) was apparently the first purpose-built picture-palace in Bristol, and was opened in 1910, the first year of the Cinematograph Act. However films had already been shown to public audiences in the Counterslip Hall (1908), Bedminster Hall (1909) and Vestry Hall (1909) and, as all three of these buildings were used for film-shows

after the Act came into force, presumably they coped satisfactorily with the new fire and public protection regulations.

From 1910 until after the first world-war a crop of long, narrow and usually single-storey buildings, were erected all over the country. This took place mostly in the years before 1914, as wartime restrictions and the introduction of an Amusement Tax in 1915 tended to temporarily reduce audiences. The buildings which resulted accumulated the various accoutrements of the new leisure industry, red plush, marbled walls and ledges, bevelled rose-tinted mirrors, shaded lights, plants in brass pots and uniformed usherettes. The introduction of tip-up seats enabled cinema managers to increase the numbers of fee-paying customers into a moderate-size building whilst still retaining the unforgettable atmosphere of warm (often too warm) cossetted luxury.

At the start of the 1914-18 war it has been estimated that there were over three thousand five hundred cinemas successfully operating in Britain and it is perhaps fortunate that the four year interregnum gave the industry time to re-assess its requirements. In the USA the need to provide entertainment for vast numbers of manufacturing workers allowed the cinema industry to continue expanding and American architects faced the problems of catering for increased numbers of patrons much earlier. Thus by the 1920s there were many very large 2000 - 3000 seater picture-theatres existing in America and multi-discipline architectural practices involving structural engineers, acoustic engineers (talkies were several years off but large orchestras were quite common) had come into being. Their picture-palaces had become very different from the simple rectangular boxes to which we had become accustomed.

On Monday May 23rd 1921, at the Royal institute of British Architects, Robert Atkinson read a paper entitled *The design of the picture theatre*. Atkinson was one of the new generation of architects who were facing the challenge of the super-cinemas. He had visited the USA to look at American cinema-building techniques and the methods of film presentation which had evolved with them. Atkinson found that his American colleagues had forsaken the use of traditional halls and theatres adapted to receive film projection apparatus, for a new concept of buildings designed around the particular requirements of film projection as an entertainment medium. The aim was to place the greatest possible number of seats at fifty to sixty feet from the screen but also within one hundred and twenty feet. Sight lines were considered to be all-important and were arranged by sloping the floor so that an individual vision line was three inches above the vision line of the seat in front. The sight line was always based on a person being able to see the bottom of the picture and, where a balcony was provided, it was considered vital that the top of the picture was also visible from the rear seats under the balcony. The seats were also slightly staggered, each row to the next, in order to give the maximum direct view round tall hats etc.

Seating in American cinemas usually allowed two feet six inches by one foot six inches for the cheaper seats with a gradual increase to three feet by two feet in the most expensive. No seat was placed nearer the picture than one screen length, the line of the first row of seats being determined by taking an angle of 60° from each extremity

of the screen. Similarly an angle of 120° dictated the outer extremities of the seating right and left. Gangways were placed every twelve seats and were never less than three feet six inches in width increasing in size towards exits and entrances. Atkinson found that American architects designed their buildings round the projection equipment and particularly the 'throw' of the film. It was usually worked out first and all other aspects of the building construction followed. When a balcony was decided upon, projection from above it could result in a tilted screen or a distorted picture, so quite often it was decided to build a 'thick' balcony with the projection booth accommodated within the structure.

It is impossible to say what effect Atkinson's ideas had on British cinemas. He made them readily available for everyone and seems to have had a good reputation with the building firms that specialised in picture-houses. He practiced what he preached, his Regent Cinema in Brighton (1921) being considered a model of logical design and was the first 'Super-Cinema' in this country. In Bristol from 1922 until 1939, eighteen new cinemas were opened and several of them, the Cabot at Filton, the Orpheus at Henleaze, the two Ambassadors at Bedminster and Kinswood, the Ritz at Brislington, the Embassy in Queens Road and the Odeon in Broadmead, all incorporated design features which could be said to have arisen from the influence of Robert Atkinson.

In this brief survey of the historical background to cinema buildings, the Odeon is most representative of an era which had a considerable influence on the design and financing of picture-houses during their most expansive period. At the time when Atkinson was putting forward his ideas the Birmingham architect, Harry Weedon, had already designed a cinema, The Picturedrome, Perry Barr in 1912. It was Weedon who, as one of the first entrepreneur-architects, was to turn the design and construction of cinema buildings almost into a production-line operation.

In the early 1920s Oscar Deutsch, born into Deutsch and Brenner, metal merchants but with a natural liking for show-business, bought the Crown Cinema, Coventry. Within a few years he had half-a-dozen cinemas under his control and in 1934, during the building of the Warley Odeon, near Birmingham, he made the acquaintance of Harry W Weedon. The two men became firm friends and started what was to become an extremely important professional collaboration. In conjunction with the Odeon Theatres Technical Department, a comprehensive design brief was formulated incorporating, for example, the use of cream faience tiling and the familiar clear graphics. From 1934 until the outbreak of war in 1939, Weedon designed or, as consultant architect was responsible for control of, some 250 cinemas.

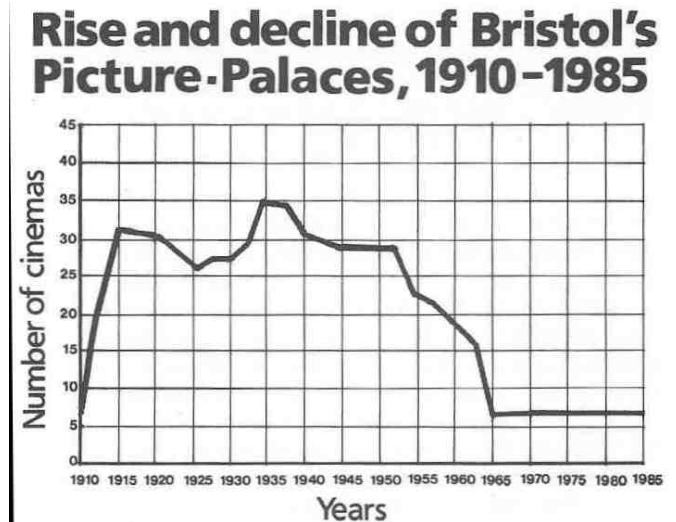
Weedon's architectural practice, based at a large Victorian house in Moseley, one of Birmingham's leafier suburbs, became cinema-orientated in a way which must have astonished some of his more traditional-architectural colleagues. Charts were prepared incorporating seat-spacing, sanitary accommodation standards, projection room layout and equipment, heating and ventilating arrangements, floor and wall finishes, together with the various alterations dictated by local building regulations and LCC and Home Office requirements. Seating blocks were designed so that they could be permuted in all

directions, whilst working details were prepared for joinery, lighting troughs and fittings. Harry Weedon's architectural assistants were also provided with boxwood scales giving standard Odeon cinema stair treads and risers, back to back seating details and Odeon seat-width dimensions.

Between 1931 (Perry Barr) and 1939 (Blackpool) the Odeon organisation built over 100 new cinemas in addition to refurbishing hundreds of existing ones which had been purchased, in what must have been one of the earliest examples of corporate planning. All Odeons were different externally, designed to suit the site and locality, but all had a measure of similarity internally (not always too obvious) which made the architectural work much easier and very much more profitable. Harry Weedon's modest Birmingham practice could not have handled all this business but did not have to for, under the overall design brief worked out by Weedon and administered by the Odeon Theatre management, projects were given to other architects with Harry Weedon vetting the designs at the appropriate stages. Amongst the cinemas built under this system were the Weston-super-Mare Odeon (1934), the Bridgwater Odeon (1936) and the Bristol Odeon (1939) all designed by T Cecil Howitt.

Oscar Deutsch's often-stated aims were to produce cinemas of architectural beauty but he was also quite good at making money. When Odeon Theatres Limited became a public company in 1937 it owned three hundred cinemas and was valued at six million pounds, much of this obtained by controlling film distribution, and acquiring other cinema groups' assets and activities. They absorbed Paramount and Astoria cinemas, took over the County Group and after the second world war merged with Gaumont British, which resulted in Bristol's two Ambassador picture-houses becoming Odeons.

At the end of hostilities many of the electronic devices which had helped win the war began to influence domestic life. The development and mass-production of television had a considerable effect on the popularity of the cinema and as film-goers found it easier, and decidedly cheaper, to watch their moving-pictures at home, picture-house attendances tumbled. Between 1956 and 1965 cinemas closed almost as quickly as they had opened fifty years earlier.



Many buildings are still there. The table shows the situation at the end of 1985 and some of the sites may surprise the reader. Adaptive re-use has influenced the present-day conditions of the old picture-houses. Bingo grew in popularity as cinema-going declined, so many of the old buildings became Bingo-halls and Social Clubs. On the whole this group have survived the change reasonably and are cared for and quite well maintained. Some were bought by supermarket chains and although recognisable from the outside have been gutted and rebuilt internally. Several have been acquired for retailing and storage on a smaller scale and, although there are exceptions, this group seems to have fared worst. Finally there are those buildings which do not fit into any particular category, some such as the university-owned buildings might have benefited from more regular maintenance. Like so many aspects of industrial archaeology, it is interesting to seek out these relics of earlier years' habits. They invoke memories of times spent in different but enjoyable ways and are more interesting when one knows a little of their background.

Sources, Further Reading and Acknowledgements

The systematic study of redundant cinema buildings is not a popular pastime but the recording of the arrival of picture-palaces seems to be. There are now many regional books on the subject but none better than *A City and its Cinemas* by Charles Anderson, published by Radcliffe Press in 1983. With the aid of J. Wright's and Kelly's Bristol Directories, several Reece Winstone books of photographs and a large street plan of the city, I had already located a considerable number but was not confident about the completeness of my list. The publication of Charles Anderson's book was fortuitous and I am happy to acknowledge my debt to him. He confirmed much of what I had found, introduced me to new material and, best of all, gave a chronology of the motion-picture industry in Bristol. I can wholeheartedly recommend his book for its historical value and as a jolly good 'read'. I hope that this article will complement his scholarship.

The early history of the technical background to the cinema is full of problems for those looking for such material. Between 1839 and 1895 there was a bewildering number of inventions, claims and counter-claims, some involving West Countrymen such as **Fox Talbot, Rudge** and **Friese Greene**. Fortunately there are also some very good sources of motion-picture history quite easily obtainable, such as *The History of Movie Photography in Britain* by Brian Coe published by Ash and Grant in 1981, containing a useful paragraph on the activities of Louis Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot and deals with the controversial claims of William Friese Greene with tact and considerable technical understanding.

Dennis Sharp's elegant book *The Picture Palace and Other Buildings for the Movies* (Hugh Evelyn) deals with the transition from music-halls to purpose-built cinemas and chronicles the Robert Atkinson and the Harry Weedon eras. For those who are interested in the architecture of cinemas, David Atwell's *Cathedrals of the Movies* (The Architectural Press,) is a source book to be recommended.

For help with the practicalities I am grateful to Christopher Powell of UWIST and BIAS, Dr George Parker of Wells, Edward Cannock of Keynsham and to my wife, Joan, who

is now adept at recognising cinema buildings and who viewed with amused tolerance, many miles of back-tracking around Bristol suburbs in my determination to photograph every cinema building still extant. I would welcome further information, particularly on the cinemas of outlying areas.

A District Postscript

Quite predictably the smaller city, town and country cinemas have suffered during the past few years with a closure rate comparable to Bristol and with very similar re-usage patterns. In Bath there are now two picture-houses, the Beau Nash in Westgate Street and the Little Theatre in St Michael's Place remaining from the five



Picture by George Parker

The Palace Theatre, later cinema, Wells.

which existed after the war. The Odeon vanished in the rebuilding of the Southgate Street Shopping Precinct, whilst the Forum opened in 1934 and closed in 1968 although still carrying the name above its doric facade, only houses the Bath Dance Centre. The fifth, the Scala in Oldfield Park, is a Co-op supermarket

Midsomer-Norton still has its Palladium and Wells retains both the Regal, as a working picture-house and the delightful little Palace Theatre building which, although now converted into retail premises, still has its cinema appearance. An attractive canopy runs the length of its frontage carrying the name in coloured glass. At the time of writing, there is a development plan under discussion which could remove this feature, but it is hoped that it can be incorporated into a future proposal.

Until July 1984 there was a cinema in Keynsham called the Charlton which looked the same as when it first opened in 1936. In this case 'first opening' has a more than usual significance for in 1974 the Charlton closed and it seemed that it would follow others into oblivion, but after twelve months absence it reopened due to public demand and continued with a film plus bingo programme until the final curtain. Zettlers Enterprises, a national bingo and social club chain has bought the Charlton, re-decorated it and opened it full-time as a social club.

If there were to be a prize for the elderly picture-palace thoughtfully rescued from lost and now maintained with loving care, it would surely go to the tiny Berkeley Cinema in Marybrook Street, now operating as Berkeley Antiques. This was opened on November 10th 1938 by Lt Col Alan G Mason, a pioneer of earlier picture-houses in the area.

The Charlton, Keynsham. 49 years old.



It finally closed in August 1982, but like the Keynsham cinema, the Berkeley had been closed prematurely in November 1976. It started again in August 1977 continuing despite all difficulties for a further five years. When Alan Mason died in December 1982 (at the age of 91) the building was sold to Peter and Roslyn Dennis, the present owners, who decided to use it to expand their antiques business but to retain as much as possible of the old cinema atmosphere. Gloucester officialdom had different ideas and proposed demolition and redevelopment of the site for residential use. The Dennis's were adamant that it must remain as 'the Berkeley' and fought a fairly acrimonious campaign against the planners, which with considerable local support, they won. Having completed extensive repairs and modernisations they now have a building of which they can justifiably feel proud. Externally it looks



The splendid little Berkeley 47 years old.

splendid. Internally it is filled with antiques, but remains as much of a cinema as they can make it. The sloping floors are still (quite inconveniently) there, the stage and curtains are still in place and the decoration has been carried out in Odeon colours.

Alan Mason spent the last fifty-four years of his life (apart from the war years) operating cinemas. He was responsible for moving-picture shows at Sharpness, Frampton-on-Severn, Drybrook (in the Forest of Dean), Upton-on-Severn and Berkeley. His life is recounted in a small book: *Lt Col A/an G Mason, a short story of the local Cinema scene*, by James Thomas. The text shows what a dominant force moving-pictures were in peoples' lives between 1900 and the 1960s and how picture-palaces will retain a warm spot in many peoples' memories for a long time to come.



The Magnet, almost on the M32. 71 years old.



The Bedminster Odeon, once Ambassador. 49 years old.



People's Palace, later New Palace, then the Gaumont 73 years old.



A rather special site. The Orpheus stood here and after it closed the John Lewis Partnership built a new supermarket incorporating a new-style mini-cinema with three screens

A chronology of existing Bristol Picture-Palaces 1909-1985

			Nat Grid Ref	open	closed	Current use
1	Vestry Hall	Pennywell Road	600735	1909	1954	Commercial premises
	Bedminster Town Hall	Cannon Street	584715	1909	1954	Store
3	Scala	Cromwell Road	589746	1910	1974	Warehouse
4	Fishponds	Fishponds Road	630757	1911	1922	Public Library
	Concorde	Stapleton Road	606745	1911	n/a	Cinema/Bingo
6	Coliseum	Park Row	581732	1912	c1924	University premises
	Granada	Church Road	615735	1912	1961	Social Club
	Gaumont	Baldwin Street	587729	1912	1980	Club
	Regal	Staple Hill Road	645760	1912	1963	Social Club
	Regent	Regent Street	645739	1912	1949	Commercial premises
11	Brislington	Sandy Park Road	612715	1913	1955	Bingo Hall
	Eastville Hippodrome	Stapleton Road	606744	1913	1959	Store
	Metropole	Sussex Place	598743	1913	1968	Commercial premises
14	Magnet	Newfoundland Road (M32)	597735	1914	1937	Commercial premises
	Academy	Cheltenham Road	591742	1914	1955	Religious premises
	Premier	Gloucester Road	594763	1914	1963	Commercial premises
	Ashton	North Street	575715	1914	1954	Store
18	Whiteladies	Whiteladies Road	578739	1921	n/a	Cinema
19	Bristol North Baths	Gloucester Road	590753	1922	1936	Public Baths
20	Vandyke	Fishponds Road	633758	1926	1973	Social Club
21	Kingsway	Two Mile Hill	639737	1928	1959	Motor showroom
22	Cabot	Gloucester Road	599783	1933	1961	Supermarket
	Gaiety	Wells Road	608705	1933	n/a	Cinema
	Savoy	Shirehampton	532766	1933	1962	Social Club
25	Odeon (Ambassador)	Winterstoke Road	576706	1936	1961	Bingo Hall
	Ritz	Brislington	621705	1038	1964	Supermarket
	Filwood Broadway	Knowle West	593696	1938	1961	Commercial premises
28	Odeon	Broadmead	590733	1939	n/a	Cinema
	Rex	North Street	582715	1939	1980	Social Club
30	New Bristol Centre	Frogmore Street	585730	1966	n/a	Cinema
31	Studios 5/6/7	Henleaze	576759	1973	n/a	Cinema
	Studios 1/2/3/4	All Saints Lane	589732	1973	n/a	Cinema
33	Europa	Lower Castle Street	589732	1974	n/a	Cinema