THE EMPIRE MUSIC HALL

Nuneaton

By Victor Welland

**Public House Entertainment**

Informal concerts were regular features in Victorian public houses. In the 1840’s pubs more generally began to advertise ‘Harmonic Meetings’. John Beet, landlord of the Half Moon inn in Abbey Street, oversaw such entertainments in his establishment during this decade and was most likely chairman of the proceedings. An advertise-ment in Lascelles Directory of 1850 refers to the Harmonic Society held there every Saturday and Monday evening “the Chair to be taken at 8 o’clock”. Monday was a favourite day for working class people to take an unofficial day off work and came to be referred to as Saint Monday. The entertainers were most likely any customers who fancied singing a song for a drink. Entertainment was good for business and as the concerts in the ‘free and easies’ progressed to more formal affairs, with professional entertainers engaged to appear, successful proprietors enlarged their premises or built on a music room. Usually no entrance charge was made, admission to the hall being by a check or token, which could be exchanged for drinks.

## The Crystal Palace

## Ebenezer Brown (1828-1905) is credited with opening the town’s first music hall at the Crystal Palace inn in the market place. Brown was incredibly adept at speculating in ventures that earned him profitable gains, one of which, during the 1860’s, was the purchase of public houses. He himself, surprisingly, was an abstemious man, but this line of business allowed him profits to invest in other fields, including support of the Nuneaton Theatre and Entertainments Company in 1899. The Crystal Palace was an 18th century building, originally the Old Crown inn, but known as the Hare and Squirrel when Brown acquired it about 1860. He eventually re-named it, after the famous London venue, and altered the premises, placing an entrance door to front on to Market Place (the entrance was originally in Wash Lane, later called Queen Street, then Queens Road). A room named the Spirit Vaults was advertised as ‘the finest in the town’.

## It is not known for sure when the ‘new’ Crystal Palace opened for business, but is likely to have been Saturday December 23rd 1865 for Brown’s obituary in the Midland Counties Tribune informs us that “He opened on the Saturday night, Christmas being on the next Monday. He had to pay the first night’s takings to the work-people. He had a very good night for a start but, the cellar being cold, he could not get the ale very bright. This, however, does not appear to have affected him much, for he did well during the Christmas”. The concert hall probably opened later, after Brown acquired adjoining premises to expand the public house. It is listed in White’s directory of 1874: “The Crystal Palace Music Hall, Market Place, is open on Monday and Saturday evenings”. The Nuneaton Chronicle (the town’s only newspaper at the time) did not advertise the concert hall, although a prominent advertisement for Brown’s establishment refers to the fine ales available there. Public houses had a hard core of regular clientele anyway and there was little or no need to advertise the concert room. The Chronicle, a Tory supporting publication, may have desired to appease any readers who were supporters of the Temperance Society, the movement of the teetotallers that was particularly strong at the time. In the 1870s much of the weekly income of some working class families was spent on drink, causing much misery, and members of the Society sought to close pubs, or at least stem their popularity, as a way of reducing drunkenness.

The 1860’s witnessed a huge increase in the popularity of tavern entertainment and by the time Brown opened his Crystal Palace the number of provincial music halls had doubled. He was not long without competition. William Winter, proprietor of the Granby Head in Church Street held entertainments there about 1873. Sam Beasley was the chairman and a Mr H Thompson accompanied the singers on the piano. It is possible a separate concert room was built at the rear of the premises and the name Alhambra given to it, for it is listed as such in the Era Almanack theatre guide of the time. Another public house with a concert hall was the Black Horse in Wheat Street. The hall opened on January 10th 1875 (and by this time *was* advertised in the Chronicle) with Sam Beasley (“The Celebrated Baritone and Motto Vocalist”) again performing the tasks of chairman. He had most likely left the Granby Head by then. Tom Tinsley (c1853-1910) who became a noted music hall personality, probably entertained in one of these establishments, as the author of *British Music Hall* (2005) claims he “started work as an engineer before becoming a comic singer at Nuneaton, singing 16 songs a night for thirty shillings a week”. Tinsley eventually became chairman at the famous Gatti music halls in London.

Ebenezer Brown sold his interests in the Crystal Palace and his other establishments in 1879. By 1881many magistrates were opposed to the small halls, and public house entertainments generally. As usual, Monday and Saturday nights were the most popular, although some pubs held musical evenings every night and there was no law to control them. In Nuneaton in that year only four public houses had concert rooms with an element of professional entertainment. These were the Crystal Palace (the landlord then was George Taylor) White Swan (Joseph Bradbury) Granby’s Head (John Hames Goode) and the George and Dragon (John Deville). All four tenants, along with the owners of the pubs, at the Brewster Sessions that year objected to their licences being refused. Mr Walker, Nuneaton’s Superintendent of the police, objected to the renewal as all four landlords allowed singing and music to take place on the premises every night and employed professional musicians. There was confusion as to how much, and what kind of entertainment, was permissible, and although no laws were apparently being broken, the landlords and owners of the four public houses consented to withdraw the music, and the licences were granted. In Leicester a chief constable requested, and obtained, a clause concerning musical licensing which virtually wiped out pub entertainment in that city by 1885, and by 1900 many towns and cities enacted similar moves and the number of public houseconcert rooms was reduced. In Nuneaton, however, in 1899 ‘harmony evenings’ were still being held at the Queens Head with regular ‘smoking concerts’ and a ‘concertina concert’ in November. The Crystal Palace, although long past its glory days of Brown’s time, held a ‘Bohemian Club’ with piano playing by Richard Hughes and George Wyman. A few songs at the piano continued to be allowed in pubs for decades, but the organised public house music hall was no more.

**Empire Skating Rink**

Roller-skating had short periods of popularity in the 1880s and early 1900s and the craze was revived again in 1909. In that year the central hall of the Queens Road school was already being used for rinking during dinner times and on Saturdays, prompting the Clerk of the Council Education Committee to write to the headmaster emphasising that permission *must* be sought! The author of an article in the Nuneaton Chronicle of 9th July was of the opinion that roller-skating was “here to stay” and that huge returns were to be made from promoting the entertainment. Earlier in the year, during April, plans had been passed for a rink at the Public Hall in Abbey Street, but instead the Queens Hall in Vicarage Street was utilised. This opened as the Cosy Rink on Wednesday afternoon 1st December. Skaters who previously had to travel to Coventry or Birmingham were now catered for locally and soon other rinks opened at Earl Shilton, Atherstone and Hinckley.

The success of the Prince of Wales theatre encouraged the directors of the Nuneaton Theatre and Entertainments Company to consider building a skating rink in the town. Land in Back Street, fronting on to Leicester Road, was earmarked for it. George Ward, the architect of the theatre, was again engaged as designer and the same firm of Dallows of Blackheath to build it. Aware that the current popularity of skating may again prove to be short-lived, the commission was to construct a building that could be easily converted into a music hall. The plans were provisionally approved on 28th July 1909 and the Empire rink opened a week after the Cosy rink on Thursday evening 10th December. It was described in the pages of the Chronicle:

*“The building has been substantially constructed with red brick facings*

*and terra cotta dressings, and slated roofs, presenting a handsome*

*elevation to Leicester Road with an ornamental veranda over the*

*principal entrance. An entrance is gained by means of a spacious hall,*

*reached by a flight of steps, to a lofty apartment adapted in every*

*conceivable manner to the purpose for which it was constructed. At*

*the far end of the hall is a gallery, with seating accommodation for*

*about a hundred persons. On two other sides arcades communicate with*

*a wide promenade, the whole encircling a magnificent skating arena*

*of 80 ft by 80 ft, or a total area of nearly 7,000 square feet, lit up by*

*eight arc lamps. At the entrance end of the rink is situated an elevated*

*bandstand with accommodation for 15 performers. In one corner is*

*situated a delightfully cosy café, where afternoon teas and refreshments*

*may be obtained. In addition, are provided ample offices, cloak rooms,*

*skate rooms, and lavatory accommodation.*

*In case of emergency, besides the ordinary doors, there are*

*provided five emergency exits fitted with patent automatic bolts, which*

*open upon pressure being applied. Decoration, tastefully arranged,*

*relieve the building and comprise brilliantly coloured streamers and*

*lanterns, the whole evolving into a veritable fairy land when the lights*

*are on. It should be noted that the floor has been specially prepared*

*by means of the patent Model Electrical Surfacing Machine, as used*

*upon all the American skating rinks. Winslow and Phillips’ ball-bearing skates are provided for the use of visitors”.*

The Empire Rink opened from 10.30 each morning until 10.30 every night and admission was 6d, but free for the first two hours, and hire of skates cost a shilling.

At 9.00pm, a shilling charge included admission and skates. (The Cosy Rink traded for the same hours and charged half the prices of the Empire). The Assembly Room section of the building was initially used for Sunday Sacred Concerts. The content of these entertainments – “admission by silver collection” - allowed the hall to be opened on that day but the concerts proved unpopular and ceased in April 1910.

Not only did the craze for roller rinking prove short-lived yet again, the Empire was not helped by the fact that the Cosy Rink was in direct competition with it and charged less. At the end of April 1910, the Chronicle reviewer was extolling the virtues of the Empire – “I notice that the management have just had the floor re-surfaced at the Empire Rink. This has made a decided improvement, and the skating surface is again perfect. The attendance at the rink continues to be quite up to the average, and the enthusiasm is just as keen as ever” – but oddly, only a week later, the reviewer announced the rink was to be closed on 21st May. No doubt the Cosy benefitted by the Empire Rink’s demise (threatened competition to them both from a rink and public hall in Coton Road never materialised) and it was still in business the following year, staging Boswell’s Royal Circus entertainment there in May. But the popularity of roller skating had once again passed.

### **Electric Theatre and Music Hall**

### Only a week after closure of the Empire as a skating rink it re-opened as the Empire Electric Theatre and Music Hall on Monday 30th April 1910. The heyday of music hall had passed by 1910 and more refined variety houses had replaced them, but with as much enthusiasm as he had for the theatre, Albert Cross engaged as general manager of the new hall, John Tomkinson, whose Gypsy Company had played at the theatre in April. Charles Poole, whose Myriorama variety had also appeared during the same month, was employed to organise the bioscope film shows. Live variety was the main element at the Empire, twice nightly at 7 and 9; the ‘popular’ prices were 2d, 4d and 6d. Several acts were included in each programme and films were also shown with a change of programme every Monday and Thursday. Most shows included singers, dancers and comics, but occasionally the bill might have acrobats, magicians, sketch artistes, jugglers, musicians, ventriloquists, puppets and even animal acts - Lockhart’s Famous Elephants were on the fourth programme, surely not the easiest act to accommodate! The Chronicle, (Cross’s newspaper!) was enthusiastic about the new hall:

*“When the architect drew out his plans for the building, he had in view*

*the fact that at some time it would be utilised as a music hall. The management have gone to great expense in providing cosy tip-up chairs,*

*and these are so arranged that everyone in the building will have an*

*uninterrupted view of the screen and stage. For the week commencing May 30th an excellent programme has been arranged. The very latest films will be shown on the bioscope, and the management also announce the expensive engagement of the wonderful and successful Lizette Troupe – the only quartette of lady acrobats and champion tumblers in the world. Molly Augarde is also appearing, and she is recognised as a charming singer*

*with a delightful sweet voice. Every item on the programme will be of a*

*high standard, and the whole will go to make an excellent entertainment”.*

Among the artistes appearing during the following weeks was the magician Dr Walford Bodie, already familiar to regular theatregoers from his previous appearances at the Theatre Royal and Prince of Wales, and Leoni Clarke (1852-1927) whose impressive array of performing birds earned him the billings ‘Champion Pigeon Charmer of the World’ and ‘The Bird King’. The popularity of the Empire music hall was not in doubt. One evening at the end of the second week more than a thousand persons reportedly paid to enter the second house after the first was completely full. Up to this time only occasionally had the theatre mounted variety shows, and for those who had not yet witnessed the projection of films on to a white screen, the darkening of the auditorium for the showing of them was probably a novelty. The Chronicle was impressed by the use of an usher and remarked: “For people coming late when the hall is darkened for the pictures, a boy now conducts late-comers to their seats by a hand electric lamp”. A mere week between the hall closing as a skating rink and reopening as a music hall, however, was clearly inadequate to adapt the building successfully to it’s new use. After the show on August 27th, the Empire closed for two months for essential alterations.

Ward and Ball were engaged to design the adaptations and Dallows employed again to bring them to fruition, once the Council had discussed and passed the plans. At a cost of between two and three thousand pounds, the work necessary to bring the building up-to-date as a modern music hall involved removing the dividing wall between the main entrance and the corridor, to create a spacious vestibule leading to the balcony and stalls; placing a staircase to the circle; adapting the gents cloakroom into a retiring and smoke room; forming an exit from the pit for an outlet into Back Street; transforming the ladies cloak rooms and skate rooms into six dressing rooms; adapting the café as a bar if an excise licence should be granted; broadening the stage to run the whole width of the building, and increasing the depth of it by eight feet, also fitting flies so that any size of scenery could be dealt with. In addition, it was considered necessary to install four boxes adjacent to the stage and enlarge the orchestra pit. The stalls accommodated 200 persons and 700 in the pit area; the tiered circle had seats for 400. It is regrettable that no photographs have so far come to light to illustrate what the interior of the hall looked like for it must surely have been impressive, an attractive companion piece to the theatre.

Prior to the work commencing, the Nuneaton Theatre and Entertainments Company applied to the Nuneaton Justices for a full dramatic licence for the Empire, to include the sale of alcoholic refreshments. The Licensed Victuallers Association opposed this. Albert Cross informed the bench that apart from the dramatic licence being required for the sketches and lighter comedy acts, many members of the audience left the building in interval to frequent neighbouring public houses, annoying people when returning to their seats after the performance had recommenced. He maintained that an excise licence would allow those who required refreshments to obtain them on the premises during the interval, and a full dramatic licence had been granted to the Prince of Wales Theatre and had not, he claimed, adversely affected the trade at the nearby Holly Bush and Crown inns.

The representative of the Licensed Victuallers contended that there was no necessity for a licence to sell liquors because the house filled nightly and the lack of one did not affect the halls popularity. They did not object to the dramatic licence but to allowing the sale of drink, and if the Theatre Company could pledge not to apply for an excise licence, there would be no further objection. The bench considered the case and decided to grant the dramatic licence on condition that no excise license would be applied for.

### **The New Empire**

By September 1910, Nuneaton had two cinemas in the town, the Palace in Victoria Street and the Royal in Stratford Street. On September 1st Albert Ward, the proprietor of the Palace, applied to the magistrates for a dramatic licence. Ward was willing to have it endorsed that he would not apply for an excise licence; he claimed his only desire was to protect himself if performers engaged in dialogue acts between the films at his cinema. Cinemas generally had a single live entertainer to allow for the change of film reels, which were short and projected from a single machine. The Nuneaton Theatre and Entertainment Company objected, intensely aware of the growing popularity of film shows, and concerned that the cinemas might try to compete with the dramatic fare at the theatre. In the event a decision in the matter was postponed.

The question of the differing licence requirement for theatres, music halls and cinemas was a complicated one, and created local anomalies whereby some towns shaped their own regulations. Cinematograph licences were granted by the Borough Council, music and dramatic licences by the Magistrates. The Prince of Wales Theatre held a dual licence that permitted the performance of plays as well as music hall type entertainment, and both the theatre and the Empire presumably held cinematograph licences because they showed films. The Theatre Company’s objection to the Picture Palace application for a dramatic licence lay in the threat of competition, even though it was unlikely the Palace would have wanted to stage anything longer than short scenes between the films.

The new Empire opened on Monday October 24th 1910 with dancers, musicians, comics, jugglers and singers on the bill, and among the films, the Pathe Animated Gazette, a newsreel booked as a regular feature for future film programmes. Cross engaged a Mr Sharpe as advertising manager, a position Sharpe had held with Bostock’s Railroad Circus that had played in the town in early October; Tomkinson was replaced as manager by James F Elston, the son of J F Elliston (The differing surname was presumably to distinguish them in their respective careers) who was the proprietor of the Grand Theatre in Bolton, and a friend of Cross’s.

Among the famous artistes to appear at the Empire were Harry Tate, Charles Morritt and George Robey. Harry Tate (1872-1940) entertained for many years before appearing at London’s Oxford Music Hall in 1895. He became an immediate success and most renowned for comical sketches based around pastimes such as gardening, fishing, golfing and (his first, and probably the most popular) motoring. He performed his Motoring sketch at the Empire in November 1910 and again a couple of years later. Charles Morritt (1860-1936) was an illusionist and hypnotist, a music hall proprietor in his birth county of Yorkshire before turning to entertaining and an eventual appearance in London in 1886. He was billed as ‘The Yorkshire Conjuror’ but retained his links with management and was an early exhibitor of moving pictures.

George Robey (1869-1954) was the most famous artiste to appear at the Empire. Such was Robey’s fame at the time that it is unlikely the management could have afforded more than the single appearance he made on Thursday 15th December 1910. He earned more than a hundred pounds a week at the time. He was only twenty-one when he played at London’s Oxford music hall in 1891, and was very quickly given star billing. Most comedians adopted a trade-mark appearance and Robey’s was a red nose, heavily blackened eyebrows, a black frock coat and a squashed bowler hat. His method of performance involved recounting a funny tale, and demanding his convulsed audience stop laughing! They rarely could and he earned the billing ‘Prime Minister of Mirth’.

The Theatre Company was in profit when it reported to shareholders on 2nd May 1910 but by the end of the year Albert Cross was concerned about the competition from the town’s cinemas and excluded their advertisements from his Chronicle newspaper. Although he gave serious thought to running the theatre on the twice-nightly system at ‘popular’ prices, it was unrealistic to think that the first house audience from the Empire might make their way to the theatre to see a play at reasonable cost instead of heading for one of the picture houses. The cinemas were doing more business because films were becoming more popular. “I know that many are going to the other places because there are not enough pictures at the Empire” he wrote “What it seems to me we want is to give a similar bill to what the others are giving; this would cut out half the expense, and I should certainly think that the superior accommodation we give would be an inducement to the public to come”. Both cinemas were conversions of older buildings and the purpose-built theatre and music hall must have far exceeded them in comfort.

When Albert Cross wrote somewhat spiritedly about the state of theatre in the country generally to Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, the famous actor who was then President of the Theatrical Managers Association, he concluded “At the present time I should say the bulk of provincial theatres have either to transform to picture halls, or open their doors to the Official Receiver at a very early date. As both a theatre and music hall manager I write quite impartially on this matter, and I say advisedly that Dramatic Art in England will quickly bleed to death unless prompt first-aid is rendered”.

During 1911, apart from the ever-popular singers and comics, variety turns included magicians, puppets, Chinese conjurors, gymnasts, cyclists, ventriloquists, and extraordinary animal acts. These included Gilbert’s Performing Dogs, Miss Ella’s Forest-Bred Lions, and Mlle Sarena with “40 different animals appearing friendly on the stage together”! The most famous artiste to appear during 1911 was R G Knowles (1858 – 1919) who made two single appearances on the evenings of 30th May and 25th October. Billed as ‘The Very Peculiar American Comedian’, Richard George Knowles was in fact Canadian. His first appearance in England was at the Trocadero music hall in 1891; thereafter he had many successful years on the halls. Like George Robey, Knowles adopted distinctive attire for his performances - he always wore a seedy frock coat, battered hat and white trousers. He sang his numbers in a husky voice delivered in a disjointed manner, hence the billing matter!

Other artistes included Louie Freear, a comic singer whose fame of several years earlier was associated with the musical theatre; The Six Brothers Luck, sketch artistes whose act included a Harry Houdini spoof called *Demon of the Cellar*; The Three Sisters Sprightly, (originally two) singers who toured the halls successfully for many years, and The Eight Lancashire Lads, clog dancers among whom Charlie Chaplin had been an anonymous member in 1898.

Another of the Empire’s sporadic closures occurred after July 1st1911 when it closed “for renovation and structural improvements” until 7th August. Thereafter, the usual variety mix included the second appearance by R G Knowles, and Mlle Florence, a risley artiste who attracted crowds in the town every day by ‘pedalling’ a ball from the town centre to the Empire in order to advertise her act. This publicity stunt may have tempted extra patrons to see her performance in early November but the hall was not doing sufficient business to maintain the twice-nightly shows (other than on the ever popular Mondays and Saturdays) which ceased after November 18th. The Chronicle led readers to believe that further alterations might be made to the hall due to the “large audiences received of late” but the cessation of twice-nightly shows confirmed that the Empire lacked sufficient audiences to warrant any changes.

In January 1912, at the end of Albert Cross’s benefit performance of the pantomime in the Prince of Wales theatre, he starkly addressed his concerns about the Theatre Company’s position to the audience. He stated that many touring companies were reluctant to attend the town when five places of entertainment were in competition with each other (the Prince of Wales, Empire, Picture Palace, Royal, and Stockingford Palace) and announced that after April, the Empire would be turned into a picture hall with the theatre staging a mix of variety and touring product.

The increasing popularity of picture houses worried Cross and he was most aggravated by the staging of music hall turns in them. He had voiced his opinion to fellow directors that they should oppose the Palace cinema’s intention to stage variety turns, but had to concede to the Company solicitor that they could not stop “what is practically another music hall starting until the time for renewal of (the cinema) licence comes around”. When the annual licensing sessions took place the next February, the Theatre Company was once again opposed them. It contended that proprietors of picture houses used their licences for evolving them into music halls, whereas the intention was for music only to accompany the silent pictures. A representative for the Royal cinema (who incidentally produced a petition of more than 9000 signatures in its support) countered that it was licensed before the Empire, and from the start variety turns had been given there. It was a fact that before opening on 1st August 1910, the Royal had been granted a cinematograph licence dated 27th July 1910 from the Borough Council, and a licence “for public music, stage dancing and singing, or other public entertainment of the like kind” from the Justices of the Peace at the Nuneaton Petty Sessions on 28th July 1910. The objection was unsuccessful and the cinema licences were renewed on the same terms as before.

Two weeks later, Edward Shute, proprietor of the Royal, wrote a letter to the Nuneaton Observer newspaper expressing his anger at the accusation against his cinema. “By what travesty of justice” he wrote, “was it expected that the power of the Law could be invoked to bolster up the fortunes of a ‘great concern’” (he referred to the Theatre Company) “at the expense of more popular and successful, if smaller, rivals” (the Royal and the other cinemas). He continued “The turns given at the Royal provide an agreeable variety and fill what otherwise would be waits in the programme, and as to their quality, the majority have worked, or are booked for, the Moss and Stoll, Macnaughten, and other well-known tours, and no man can truthfully say that any item put on at the Royal is of a doubtful character”. The Theatre Company made no further public protests about its position against the rising popularity of cinemas.

### **Vint’s Picturedrome**

The Company directors conceded that in the face of opposition in the town from the cinemas, and admitting that Nuneaton was a small town not comparable with places like Birmingham and Leicester, it was impossible to run profitably both a theatre and a music hall. Consideration was given to closing the Empire and running the theatre (at reduced prices) as a music hall with only the occasional dramatic play or musical. It was felt that this would mean a greater profit at the bars in the theatre, and without the Empire in opposition, the visiting companies would also benefit. However the idea was not adopted.

Cross approached Leon Vint with the idea of his leasing the Empire music hall. Vint was at first cautious about committing himself to the idea and wished Cross to assume a degree of responsibility also. “If any agreement is arrived at with your Company for my taking over this place, you are to come in as sleeping partner for one half ” Vint wrote to Cross during February 1912 “This will, of course, require a formal document between us which will have to be prepared by my Solicitor. Will you please write to me by return confirming this, as I cannot proceed with my negotiations until it is settled in black and white that you are coming in as half partner”.

Cross replied immediately expressing his desire to accept the proposition, if Vint would make clear certain concerns he had. Vint did so, remarking that to make their arrangement, a private company would cost about £30 and that he would modify the terms of offer from 2 years to 1 year - “I should know at the end of the first year whether it would be worth going on with. I have thoroughly thought the matter out, also worked the figures out. The rent must be £350 for the first year and £400 afterwards. It is not that I want to get the place cheap but I am sure the town itself is not worth much more”. This remark may have alluded to the amount of business the hall could likely generate in Nuneaton, but Vint would be rude about the town at a future date!

The Empire closed on March 9th 1912 and Leon Vint secured its lease later that month. The Chronicle previewed the opening:

*“The Nuneaton public having shown such a decided taste for high-class*

*animated pictures combined with variety turns, it will be good news for*

*them to learn that the well-known pioneer of the cinema world, Mr*

*Leon Vint, has secured a lease on the Nuneaton Empire, and henceforth*

*it will be known as ‘Vint’s Electric Picturedrome’. The Picturedrome,*

*which is to be one of the finest of it’s kind in the Midlands, will open*

*on Monday, April 8th, and will be under new management”.*

The publicity surrounding the re-launch could almost have been written by Vint himself, and probably was!

*“Mr Leon Vint’s rise in the cinematograph world has been of a Napoleon-*

*like character, and although his activities now cover the towns of Long*

*Eaton, Ilkeston, Loughborough, Rugby and Kettering in the Midlands;*

*Neath, Barry Dock, Aberavon, Llanelly and Carmarthen in south Wales;*

*Exmouth in Devon and six London theatres, not one of his ventures has*

*proved a failure, in fact they have all proved distinctly successful”.*

This was not the truth of Vint’s situation for his fortunes fluctuated wildly, and he did not run any theatres in London. But being the keen self-publicist he was, he naturally highlighted his positive achievements and exaggerated them where it served his purpose. His aim in Nuneaton was to popularise his new acquisition and hopefully make a success of it. The Chronicle went on to explain that Vint’s format in making such successes of his theatres included securing the best variety talents for them, and booking them for a whole tour rather than for single appearances. It was stated that he began his programmes modestly, gradually improving the bill of fare according to the appreciation of the audiences and the support extended by them, and concluded:

*“The ex-Empire is being thoroughly cleaned and rendered more attractive during the vacation, and there will be two performances nightly, at 7 and 9, lasting about one and three-quarter hours each. The performances on each occasion will be continuous, with no waiting whatever, and there will only be one interval of two minutes during each performance”*

Soon after Vint’s acquisition of the Empire, James Elston resigned as manager on

20th April, after almost two years in the post. During this time he had been responsible for engaging many of the major variety bookings, including George Robey and R G Knowles. Vint engaged Harold Norcliffe (his brother-in-law) to fill Elston’s post, but his tenure was short for J J Kelly was manager a few months later. Vint introduced Monday morning film shows for miners at 11am, and Saturday matinees for children at 2.30pm. The programmes were hardly impressive, even though he advertised the venue as Vint’s *Great* Picturedrome. The emphasis was still on variety turns but several interesting films included *The Great Miracle*, a spectacular drama of the Middle Ages, and *Les Miserables* shown in 1913 without the support of any variety acts. Lockhart’s Elephants made a re-appearance, as did Leoni Clarke with his ‘200 cats, rabbits, monkeys etc’ (both in September 1912) One of the more unusual acts was that of Carl Herman Unthan (1848-1929) who played the week commencing

28th October 1912 giving the Nuneaton audience the opportunity to see him play the piano and a violin and cornet solo, operate a typewriter and light a cigarette, all the actions performed with his FEET! The Prussian gentleman was billed as ‘The Pedal Paganini’ or ‘The Armless Wonder’. The only famous performer Vint engaged was Harry Tate (October 1912) again performing his ever-popular Motoring sketch. Most of Vint’s programmes included unknown, or little-known singers engaged to appear for several consecutive weeks – an unknown Blodwen Butcher made ten appearances during 1912! When Vint also became proprietor of the Prince of Wales theatre in August 1912, it created the need to make successes of two venues.

The famous Zancigs were booked to appear at the Picturedrome in March 1913. Julius Zancig (1857-1929) and his wife Agnes Zancig (c1857-1916) were Danish-American thought readers who worked their stage act by means of an elaborate code (Vint and his wife had copied the act when they were performers in the 1890s). Billed as ‘Two Minds with but a Single Thought’ Agnes Zancig generally sat blindfolded on stage while Julius went among the audience being handed items that were immediately named by his wife. Their telepathy act was extremely popular and they performed it around the world.

The continuing popularity of the town’s cinemas made it difficult to achieve profitable success for both the theatre and the music hall. Vint introduced a films-only policy at the Picturedrome from 26th May 1913. This was not successful, however, and only lasted until 21st June when the Picturedrome closed again. The venue was failing to find adequate patronage to keep it open and it was more apparent than ever that while the town could support three cinemas (and more were to come) the population was insufficient to support both a legitimate theatre and a variety hall.

Vint blamed insufficient stage area as the reason for being unable to book the biggest acts for the Picturedrome. Albert Cross suggested that the Theatre Company take back the Picturedrome to turn it in to offices. Vint was keen. “I hope it may go through,” he wrote to Cross “I would willingly give £650 a year for the theatre if they will take away the Picturedrome, on condition that the place is used for offices etc and not for another place of amusement”. Nothing came of this idea, however, and Vint made another attempt at making a success of the Picturedrome with a Grand Re-opening on 22nd September. The famous Carl Hertz gave a display of his extraordinary illusionist act in mid October but after a week of performances by the Nuneaton Dramatic Society the Picturedrome closed again on 8th November.

**Last Days**

Early in 1914 Vint had been successful in relieving Cross and himself of the Picturedrome. When a Grand Military Concert performed there on Sunday 21st February 1914 it was “by kind permission of United Electric Theatres”. This was the only use made of the hall in that year until re-opening at the end of December. Vint made efforts to persuade the company to also take on the theatre, which they finally did from 11th September.

Leon Vint was doubtless relieved to be free of the responsibility of the Nuneaton venues but the new company made no more a success of the Picturedrome than he had. It was in receivership less than a year after taking over. Although the venue was re-opened on 28th December the programmes remained uninspired with the usual mix of variety turns failing to halt a diminishing audience, even with the inclusion of a film shows. Ernie Leno, a son of the famous Dan Leno, was on the opening bill, and later in 1915 programmes included Leon and Florence Cody, the sharp-shooters who had performed their popular entertainment *The Klondyke Nugget* at the old Theatre Royal in 1900. Among many little-known comedians, Archie Pitt would become better known as the producer of reviews featuring Gracie Fields, but an unusual item on the bill in April was Arabella Allen performing her very popular impersonations of characters from the works of Charles Dickens.

The Hippodrome theatre continued to appeal, mostly because it staged the lighter fare previously associated with the music hall, but the Picturedrome closed permanently on May 22nd 1915. At the Nuneaton Law Courts in February 1917, the licence for the Picturedrome was renewed, even though the building remained closed as an entertain-

ment house. It eventually came under the control of ABC cinemas when they acquired the Hippodrome in 1929, and became their freehold property in 1936. In May 1937 the building was leased to C & E Motors, a Coventry motor sales and service Company. Severe alterations were made to the internal layout of the building in order to make a main showroom on the Leicester Road and storerooms and a service centre at the rear. In November 1937 the Debenhams Company, still trading in the town under the name of J C Smiths, built a bakery on the ground floor at the opposite end of the building to the garage, in what had originally been the stage area. A few years later, the Birmingham firm of Interlok (it produced springing for car seats but their factory was demolished in a wartime air raid) occupied the old Empire building from 1946 until moving to larger accommodation at Caldwell Road. In the 1950s Smiths still retained space in the building as storage of goods for their departmental store. The old Empire was later re-opened to the public when it became a nightclub and snooker hall in the 1970s.

The fine Hippodrome theatre, a place of entertainment for more than half a century, was eventually “lost” to Nuneaton. However, the Empire building, with a mere six year history as a music hall, survived. The structure stands as a reminder, hopefully a permanent one, of the long past age of live variety entertainment.

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