

Abergavenny cinema memories

In 2023, Gwyn Woolley provided his recollections of working in Abergavenny's Coliseum and Pavilion cinemas, to accompany the History-Points web page about the Coliseum which you can view here: <https://historypoints.org/index.php?page=the-abergavenny-coliseum>

How old were you when you started working at the cinema?

I started working at the 'Col' and 'Pav' (as the Coliseum and Pavilion were known locally) when I was thirteen. This of course was illegal but I was told that as long as I kept out of sight most of the time, all would be well. Both cinemas were owned by J Dooner Enterprises and I believe he also owned the Clarence Hall cinema in Crickhowell. I worked at both the Coliseum and Pavilion during most of the 1960's and the two working environments were strikingly different. The Coliseum operating box was quite cramped and accessed via a short vertical ladder. The twin Kalee 8 projectors had exposed sprockets and were extremely noisy. However, there was a fire-escape where one could sit and take in a lovely view of the local mountains. By contrast, the Pavilion operating box was very spacious, overlooking Monk Street where you could watch the street scene below. The projectors there were Kaylee 19's with everything built in and beautifully quiet.

What does the photo show?



Me in the Coliseum operating box when I was about 14 or 15. Over my left shoulder is the master volume control and over my right shoulder is the big Cinemascope lens that had to be swung upright into position for showing Cinemascope films. Also visible is the end of the white lever that opened the arc-lamp shutter to allow the light to shine through the film. Just visible by my left foot is the oil drip-tray – the ancient

projectors leaked oil constantly. I remember dropping our Mantovani EP (Extended Play record) into it once and it never played quite the same afterwards.

What was your job and what did it involve?

For my initial years, I was employed as 'rewind boy', meaning that I had to manually rewind each reel of film as it came off the projector, taking care to replace it in the right position in the storage rack. Each reel ran for around 20 minutes and rewinding took about 5 so there were regular periods of inactivity.

Films ran for either three or six nights or, very occasionally for a major blockbuster such as Ben Hur, for a fortnight. The big posters advertising the next films had to be rotated with the latest on display outside. It vexes me to think how many great posters were consigned to the bin at the end of their showing – if only we'd known! At the end of each film's run the film had to be de-spoiled and put into tins ready for onward transport. This required some dexterity and after releasing the big coil of unsupported film from the winder it had to be kept absolutely vertical, otherwise the centre would drop out and proceed to cover the floor with yards and yards of loose film. It was a lengthy and specialised job to put it right again.

I was also the general 'gofor' and the two principal tasks were to collect an old-fashioned washstand jug of hot, sweet tea from the Coliseum Café just down the road each Saturday morning and the other being to fetch the occasional parcel of fish and chips. The chip shop was on the corner of Frogmore Street and Baker Street and for a shilling the options were a one-shilling bag, two 'sixes', three 'fours' or four 'threes'. Given that every bag regardless of size was topped off with a few extra chips, the last option was normally the best, particularly when accompanied with an extra free bag of 'batter bits'.

Who was the manager at that time?

The staffing comprised the manager Ted Richards, the chief (projector) operator, a couple of part-time second operators and myself. Downstairs there was the cashier and a couple of usherettes (compete with torches, of course). At some point in the proceedings one of the usherettes would appear at the front carrying a little tray of ice-creams with the KiaOra sign dimly illuminated.

What film was showing when you started?

I vividly remember the film showing when I started work as being 'The Girl Rosemarie'. This, I was told, was about a call-girl and when I queried the content I was told that it was about a girl who used her phone a lot. During the 1960's films were rated as 'U', 'A' or 'X' and having expressed some concern that I was about to be exposed to an 'X' I was told that a piece of cardboard with a small hole would be paced over the viewing porthole in the operating box so that I would be seeing it only with one eye.

How did you fit in your cinema work with school work?

My working hours were 5 – 10 pm four weekday nights each week and then 4 – 11 pm on Saturdays, giving me a working week of 26 hours on top of my school time. I was a pupil at the King Henry's School – at the time a brand new school on the Old Hereford Road – so as can be imagined this must have had a detrimental effect on my studies. My homework was generally done amid the noise and busyness of the operating box, usually using the lid of the record player as a makeshift desk. On one occasion I needed to draw a graph and found myself without a pencil so I improvised using a spare carbon rod from the projector arc-lamp. After submitting my homework, my teacher wrote 'A group of trained spiders could draw a neater graph than this'.

How much were you paid initially (and what did you spend it on)?

My pay for several years was £1 per week – an average adult wage at that time was around £15 per week so my 26-hour week represented very good value for the company. At the time, a single 45-rpm record cost 6/8d so a week's wages could buy 3 records (which I frequently did). The music shop was Heinz and Allen in Frogmore Street and the Coliseum showed an advert for the shop at every showing in exchange for which one free record could be obtained every few weeks. These would be played while the audience assembled and even today the sounds of Mantovani and Russ Conway still evoke vivid memories.

In later years when I had progressed to second operator, I worked fewer hours and was paid £3 each week. A perk of the job was a weekly concessionary pass for one person; my widowed mother took advantage of this.

What do you recall about the Coliseum building - the public areas and the staff areas?

Of the two buildings, the Coliseum was probably the better, being equipped with a balcony and also I believe a bigger screen. The first four rows from the screen downstairs were the cheap seats while we regarded the balcony as very posh. There were also three different colours of lights for the proscenium although the chief operator would not tolerate the green or blue for some reason, only the red. One strange quirk of the building was that the gents' toilet had a small flush door in the wall about three feet above ground level. Behind the door was a hidden staircase which led to the upper room over the sadler's shop near the cafe previously mentioned. From there you could access the street and re-enter the cinema via the front door. I would occasionally take delight in making it obvious to customers that I had entered the toilet without apparently ever reappearing.

Were there any mishaps or amusing incidents?

On one occasion when I was still quite new and 'green', I was told that the seats were to be disinfected to rid them of fleas. Two different products were apparently needed; downstairs was a straightforward insecticide but on the balcony a different product. Rather than killing them outright, this caused blindness and eventually the fleas would fall off the balcony to their deaths (!).

Another somewhat disgusting initiation ceremony utilised the clinker that accumulated in the bottom of the coke boiler that supplied the heating system. This was housed in a small brick building in the little lane that ran behind the cinema. The procedure was to rake out the clinker onto the boiler house floor and then urinate on it. The resultant steam was unimaginably unpleasant!

Another boiler-related story was that we occasionally stoked it up to increase the heating to the point where ice-cream sales increased dramatically.

The lighting was controlled by sliders or dimmers so that it could be faded out gracefully at the start of the film. Some customers had a habit of reading a newspaper while they waited for the show to start so it was amusing to dim the lights very gradually to the point where they eventually gave up trying to read and then, equally slowly, bring the lights back up until they got their papers out again. With care, this process could be repeated several times.

What did you like and dislike about the work?

I greatly enjoyed my work although during the summer in particular I was conscious of the fact that I was missing socialising time during the long evenings. The money was obviously an attraction, as was the opportunity to see virtually every film shown in the 1960's free.