

## C for Cinema

Always known to us as “the pictures” or ‘the flicks,’ it was a big treat to visit the cinema. My earliest memory was Saturday Morning cinema when the Gaumont on Old Street in Ashton town centre was packed with scruffy kids, yelling and whooping their way through the adventures of Hop-a-Long Cassidy and Zorro. The naughtiest boys who dared to run down the backs of the seats were usually caught by the seat of their pants and chucked out. In the interval an M.C., a jovial cove of a chap, would come on stage and, using a mirror to reflect the light, he would shine the mirror on the faces of the children, all eagerly hoping that the light would land and stay on them because that meant they had won that week’s prize. There were yo-yo competitions and, when hula hoops became the current fad, there were hordes of kids on stage trying to keep the hoops moving around their hips. The last one standing or twirling won the prize.

The first ‘real’ film I remember going to see was ‘*Snow White*’, the original Disney version. I sang all the songs for weeks afterwards.

“*Heigh ho, heigh ho, it’s off to work we go...*”

“*Whistle while you work...*”

Other films that stick in my memory are ‘*The Doctor*’ series starring Dirk Bogarde as a student doctor working under the stern eye of James Robertson Justice as surgeon Sir Lancelot Spratt (1954). I saw that film at The Pavilion on Old Street.

“*Baby and the Battleship*”, a comedy in which two seamen smuggle a baby on board ship and eventually all the crew become involved in keeping knowledge of the baby stowaway from the officers. We all went to see ‘*Baby and the Battleship*’ on Christmas Eve in 1956 at a cinema in Dukinfield and walked home to Waterloo through the snow which sparkled under the street lights.

“*The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*” (1958) in which Ingrid Bergman played the missionary Gladys Aylward. Miss Aylward was working in China at the start of the World War 2. When the town comes under attack by the Japanese, Gladys leads 100 orphans over the mountains to the next province. Again it is the song has remained vivid in my memory; the film concludes with the children marching along singing ‘*Knick Knack, Paddy Whack, This old man came rolling home*’ to keep up their spirits.

“*The King and I*” (1956) starred Yul Brynner as the King of Siam and Deborah Kerr as the governess hired to teach his children. I can still sing those memorable songs from the film: “*Getting to know you, getting to know all about you.....*” and “*Whistle a Happy Tune*” and the scene where the King and Governess dance the polka “*Shall we dance?, shall we dance?, shall we dance?*”, I probably danced all the way home from The Roxy at Hurst Cross.

“*The Lady Killers*” (1956) starred Alec Guinness in which five oddball criminal types rent rooms from an elderly widow telling her they are classical musicians. They are actually planning a bank robbery. I saw the film for the first time on a rainy day during our summer holiday in Anglesey. The film was shown in a former Nissan Hut left over from the war. The rain drummed on the metal roof, almost drowning the soundtrack.

When I was older it was always a thrill and something to boast about at school if you’d managed to get into an ‘X-rated’ film. I did see ‘*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*’ and “*Room at The Top*” when I was well under age. “*King Kong and Godzilla*” came out in the 1960s but, far from being frightened, we actually found it funny.

A special treat organised for her class by my Sunday school teacher was to go to see '*South Pacific*' when it showed in Oldham. We were transported from a dark wintry day to the lush colours and jungle vegetation of a tropical island. It has remained one of my favourite films with its memorable soundtrack and a love story to satisfy a group of pre-teen girls.

One of my friends invited a group of us to go to the cinema for his birthday. His mother paid for us to go to see a "nice" film that she thought would be suitable. She chose '*The Family Way*' starring Hywel Bennett and Hayley Mills who play a just-married couple unable to consummate their relationship because of various mishaps. Not quite what G's mum had in mind?

When '*Lawrence of Arabia*' came to Ashton's Gaumont, I can remember the unruly rush for the ice-creams in the interval. I think we all felt as if we had been through the desert with Lawrence.

In Ashton in the 1950s and 60s we were blessed with many cinemas. I used to frequent the two on Old Street- "The Gaumont" which later became "the Odeon" and "The Pavilion" near the Palais de Danse. Around the corner was "The Empire" which had a glamorous Art Deco interior and was used by local amateur dramatic and operatic societies for their performances as well as showing films.

I've remained a film fan ever since. I'd like to think it was because of the formative years enjoying the cinema in Ashton.

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