

railway line in the centre of Rye Lane, known for many years as Peckham's 'Golden Mile' due to its expensive shop properties. On the floor above the cinema, the building also housed a first-class billiards hall (with 14 tables) that was opened sometime later, during 1909. Its 133 Rye Lane address was also shared with a manufacturer of sports goods, whose factory occupied the large space behind.

It was the third permanent cinema along Rye Lane (with both a small converted shop at no. 213a and the Peckham Public Hall at no. 164 already then in full-time film use). It was also the third to be opened by American-born George Washington Grant, a former Wall Street stockbroker from Cincinnati who had first become involved with film exhibition in this country as part of the directorate of what was to become Electric Theatres (1908) Ltd. A difference in opinions had apparently led to him setting up in business as an exhibitor on his own, his first venture being the Parkhurst Theatre Holloway Road in April 1908, followed by the Bijou Kilburn in June that year. These, together with the cinema in Rye Lane, were grouped as the Biograph Theatres Ltd., which he formed on 2 November 1908. Apart from the one at Victoria already mentioned, the company also later operated sites at Battersea, Hornsey, Ilford, Stoke Newington and Wandsworth, as well as opening a second cinema in Peckham, the Gem, at 121 High Street, in December 1909 (the two halls at one point sharing the same manager).

Although no plans or other records survive from the period, the Peckham building would appear to have been put up as a commercial development, with its large ground floor space presumably intended originally for use as a retail emporium of some sort or other. However, having no doubt prospected the area for suitable premises in which to launch another of his successful picture shows, George W. Grant seems to have secured the premises upon or near to completion and had the space adapted for the exhibition of films. This included the provision of four wide exits and, possibly for the first time in any British cinema, a purpose-built and separated projection box (equipped with two 'Urban' machines) to safeguard the audience against the fire risk posed by early film.

The auditorium, decorated in red and green, was some 60ft. long with a high flat ceiling and what was originally just a flat floor (a new sloping one, together with a lowered height screen for a better view of the pictures, being among the improvements that were reported on towards the end of 1909).

The *Kinematograph & Lantern Weekly* of 24 June 1909 noted: "It will seat 450, and is furnished with nicely upholstered tip-up seats, whilst the glow of roseate electric lights around the theatre heightens the effect of the beautifully lighted pictures projected onto the screen. Ample ventilation is obtained by windows and electric fans, so that the theatre is quite cool in the hottest weather. When the theatre was opened nine months ago it was specially designed for kinematograph shows, and particular care was taken in the construction of the operating chamber, which occupies a high and spacious gallery quite away from the audience and

is encased in solid concrete walls". A later mention that appeared in *Ranking World & Picture Theatre News* similarly described it as having been "Specially-built".

Whilst slightly misleading, these and other contemporary reports, on which the author of the article presumably bases his claim, would seem to refer simply to the specially-designed arrangements of the ground floor cinema space, specifically the purpose-built projection box, and not, as may seem implied, to the actual construction of the 'host' building itself which, in any case, was not solely used for showing films. Whilst possibly still of some historical note as what may well have been the earliest example of a cinema occupying a new building, rather than one converted from an existing use, the Electric Theatre would appear to have been merely an adapted space, fitted out from scratch for cinema use, and not a building designed specifically with that purpose in mind.

The building is of unitary construction, being the same four storeys at its rear as can be seen from the front (thus ruling out the possibility of a separate purpose-built auditorium having once existed behind), and there is no evidence of its upper floors having been added at a later date (the billiards hall above having opened during 1909 as noted already).

Unfortunately, no photographs appear to exist which show the building as a cinema in any detail, though its tall frontage and white painted entrance (as recalled by Leslie Woods in his 1947 book *The Miracle of The Movies*) can just be identified in at least one early view taken along Rye Lane. Like the majority of Peckham's early cinemas, the Electric Theatre enjoyed only a short existence. It must have fallen on hard times with the opening of the large and luxurious Tower Cinema just across the road in November 1914, and it closed upon expiry of the licence at the end of May 1915. The premises were subsequently turned into a sports arcade and then a penny bazaar before becoming a branch of The London Louvre (coat and frock suppliers).

The space was later divided up with the right-hand side becoming a second tea shop for J. Lyons & Co. (which had another further down Rye Lane), opened in 1921 and lasting until the mid-1960's. Today, the ground floor of 133 Rye Lane once occupied by the cinema houses a large open-fronted fresh meat and fish store, with the Redeemed Christian Church of God occupying the other levels. No trace remains from its far-off days as a silent picture palace.

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MORE ON COLNE

In last year's PICTURE HOUSE article "The First Purpose-Built Cinema: The Case Against Colne", Jon Burrows did much to explain why the Central Hall at Colne, Lancashire, was built and for what purpose. His case maintaining that Joshua Duckworth constructed the Central Hall for mixed use is entirely plausible, both as a store for Duckworth's printing works (presumably paper), for 'photographic apparatus', his stock of 6,000 lantern slides, and also for concerts, as the architect's plan