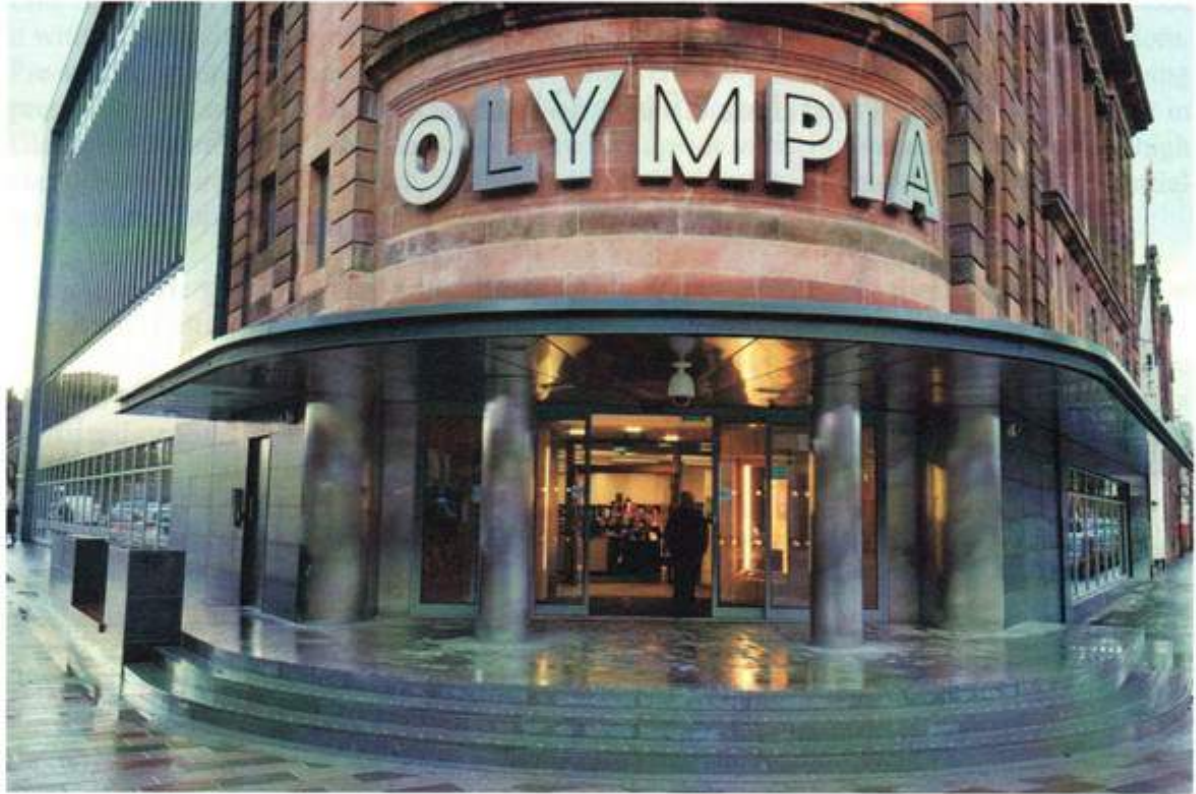


Bridgeton Icons



THE OLYMPIA

Bridgeton Library Local History Group

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The Olympia

1. Cinema-going in Bridgeton

Like many other great industrial cities, Glasgow¹ embraced the cinema boom, but it embraced it with an enthusiasm which appears to be without equal anywhere else in the United Kingdom. Pre-war newspapers carried page after page of adverts for picture houses, columns displaying programme details for 130 plus cinemas. There were more cinemas per head of population in Glasgow than any other European city. There was a wide variety of venues, ranging from high class halls, complete with bars, restaurants and uniformed ushers, to converted industrial building and “bug huts” in sorry states of repair. Bridgeton was a microcosm.

“Going to the pictures” was a regular event, and, as we will see, formed part of the life trajectory of Bridgeton folk. Young children went to the cinema with their parents, then with their pals to the ABC Minors or Children’s Matinees. As they became older, going to the pictures became part of adolescent life as they attended with a little miniature of vodka and a boyfriend or girlfriend. Most of the recollections contained here are from when respondents were young. This makes them extremely interesting and amusing, because people’s recollection of their childhood is often highly-coloured. We do not have many recollections of cinema-going in Bridgeton in the 1970s. This is because², by the 1970s, many cinemas had failed and been converted into Bingo Halls, and also because many Bridgeton people had been moved to elsewhere in the city.

A flavour of the significance of the cinema can be seen in the efforts which were made to obtain the price of entry. For those who did not have much money, there was a remarkably primitive (but effective) method³ of turning beer bottles and jam jars into currency:

Gote 6 jam jaur an took thum tay Bella's bakery across the road fay therr. If we wur lucky we hid a coupla extra jaur an that gote us a slice ow Bella's dumpling. Oan the occasional Saturday managed 2 extra jaur thit pyed tay get intay the King's in James St Brigton. Sometimes it wis even a coupla beer boattles an we took thum tay the off licence at Terry Mc Gowans pub.

Notice how some of the bottles and jars would be used to go to the cinema, rather than for the purchase of extra food!

The large number of cinemas can be seen in the immediacy of this recollection⁴:

... the cinemas in an' aroon' Brigton hiv given me many happy memories. The Arcadia fur Saturday matinees, The Kings an' Olympia fur goin' wi' mah wee Mammy (her an' mah aunty wid've climbed o'er barbed wire tae see Glen Ford). Used tae go tae the wee Royal an' Geggie an' odd time. The Orient oan the Gallowgate hid a very special atmosphere as ye walked intae it wi' its fairy castles (often wondered whit sort o' magic place wis behind them) an' a' the Disney characters. We went tae the Parade up in Meadowpark Street in Denistoun wi' the pleasure o' chips tae eat in the tram oan the way hame tae Brigton.

¹The Bridgeton Library Local History Group acknowledges the assistance received from Will McArthur, Tam McCann, Norrie McNamee and GlescaPals in the provision of data and reminiscences in this research.

²See **Bridgeton: Recollections from a Time of Change** (2014), Bridgeton Library Local History Group

³Isobel: email reminiscence (October 2015)

⁴Bob Hay (May 2003): email reminiscence (6 November 2015)

The following, carefully considered, response⁵ brings out the way in which the cinema helped to “bind” the family as a social unit, as well as providing some testimony about the drinking habits necessitated by Scotland’s Licensing Laws.

Saturday evening was special for the Neilly family as our mother and father would take me, my sister Mary and our brother Edward to “the pictures”. Our elder teenage brothers, John and Thomas, did their own thing on Saturday evenings. Our parents would sit in the row behind the “weans” so that they could give us a “skelp across the heid” or a “skite aroun’ the lug” if we misbehaved or talked too loud during the film. Because of the early closing hours of public houses in those days, about 9.00pm, our father would quietly slip out to the White Horse public house, at the corner of Summerfield Street and Dalmarnock Road, for a quick “hauf ‘n a hauf” (a nip of whisky and a half pint of beer). He would retain his cinema ticket so that he was allowed back into the cinema when the pub closed. As we got older, we would go to the Saturday afternoon matinee with siblings or pals. We were always seated at the front of the house by the ushers/usherettes and there was constant babbling and the occasional fight would break out. The ushers/usherettes, who wore uniforms and carried an electric torch, would constantly patrol the aisles trying to maintain order and silence. Persistent trouble makers were always thrown out. There would be booing and hissing if the screen went blank while the projectionist changed film reels.

2. The Evolution of the Olympia

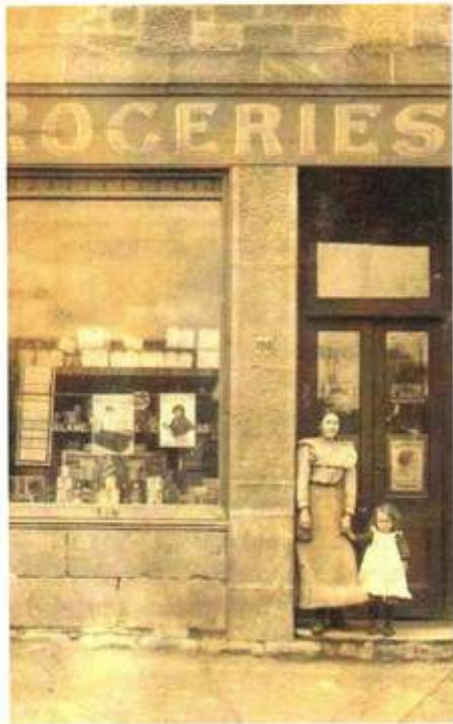
Any discussion around cinema in Bridgeton must inevitably begin with The Olympia. Dominating Bridgeton Cross, The Olympia is one of the most iconic buildings in Glasgow’s East End. Built as the Olympia Theatre of Varieties and opened in 1911, it was a most impressive red sandstone building with an interior (in the French Renaissance style) capable of seating a 2000-strong audience.

It was an amazingly opulent statement of intent. The two tiered auditorium was decorated with the lush plaster scrollwork typical of its Architect Frank Matcham and painted in two tones of cream with gilded ornamentation. It was technically and hygienically advanced with a sliding roof to let air in and smoke out. It would also advertise itself as a clean and comfortable resort, making it immensely popular with audiences who could enjoy the show secure in the knowledge that the theatre had



been disinfected with Jeyes Fluid in the interests of public health. It aimed to be Glasgow’s equivalent of the London Palladium with a variety of acts and performers. Remarkably, it was completed, using mostly local tradesmen and companies, in six months.

The Glasgow Herald⁶ made a breathless report of its opening:



The new Olympia Theatre quickly set about building an audience and one of its methods was to advertise its shows in shop windows. This photograph is from around late 1911 or 1912 and shows the shop window of the business owned by the ancestors of Bob Currie.¹⁰ The family shop was at 104 Easterhill Street in Tollcross and shows Mr Currie's Aunt Jean and Aunt Isa. In the main window of the shop can be seen two posters advertising forthcoming attractions at the Olympia. It is difficult to decipher the left hand poster, but the poster on the right is advertising a show entitled "Gypsy". The shop on Easterhill Street was close to Tollcross LMS Railway Station. It was at this station that Mr Currie's grandfather regularly boarded a train for Bridgeton Cross and the Olympia where he soaked up the atmosphere of the good old days of Music Hall. One can presume that shops close to railway stations on this particular line would have been approached to display the Olympia's forthcoming attractions.

Interestingly, the Olympia showed its first film in January 1912. It was a short film (a "bioscope") as part of the variety programme.



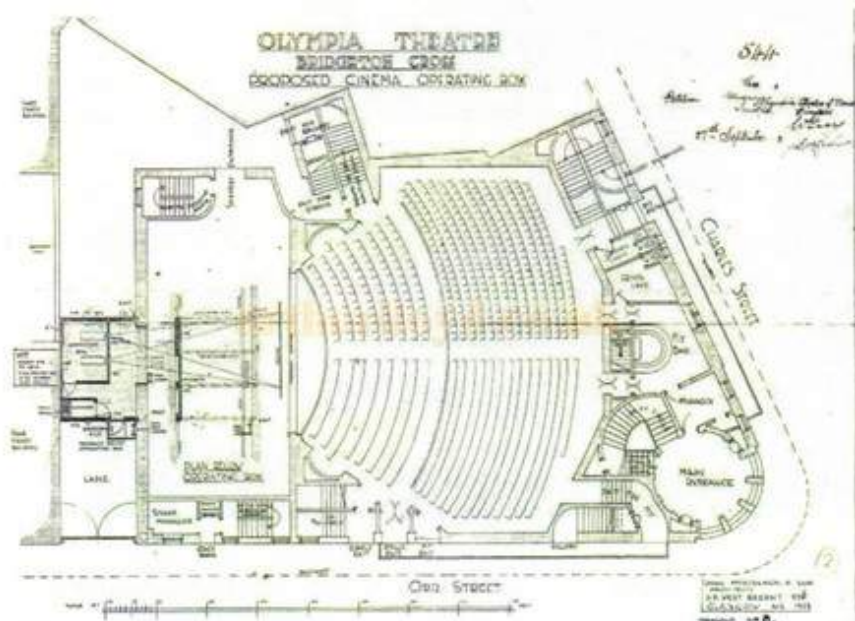
This photograph of the theatre is quite early and is thought to show that the current artiste is a Walter Belloni. We do not think that this is correct. The photograph is rather unclear and it may be that letters have fallen off the facade. The juggler who was in his heyday at this time is a Walter Bellonini (1856-1943) who hailed from Belper in Derbyshire. As it would be extremely unlikely that there were both a Walter Belloni and a Walter Bellonini trying to make simultaneous livings as jugglers, there is little doubt who is performing. It is Walter Bellonini. The photograph

is dated around 1913.

Following World War One, the appetite for variety shows waned and the Olympia was sold in 1924 to Scottish Cinema and Variety Theatres, the precursor of the ABC chain. A rear-view projection screen was installed behind the stage which allowed for a mixed programme of variety and film. The first full-length feature to be shown (in August 1924) was "The White Rose" with Ivor Novello and Mae Marsh. The programming was: Monday to Wednesday as a cinema and Thursday to Saturday as a theatre. In 1930 a sound system was installed to enable the showing of "talkies".



glamour with continuous lighting coves flowing from the sleek side walls around the top of the proscenium.



It was opened by the Lord Provost of Glasgow, P.J. Dollan, in November 1938 before an excited crowd of spectators. It being Glasgow, there were mounted police at the event, as is clear in this account of the opening celebrations given by the Glasgow Eastern Standard.¹² The report really conveys the excitement of the crowds:

So large was the crowd to witness the opening that mounted police had to hold themselves in readiness of

accidents. It was a cheery and well-behaved gathering, however, and they gave a large cheer to the Lord Provost when he stepped from his car ... In his speech the Lord Provost observed that the working-class deserved the best that is going, and in this respect they were certainly getting it. He made reference to the educational value of the cinema ... Mr David A. Stewart J.P., general manager of Associated British Cinemas, spoke of the modern methods of ventilation, heating and sound apparatus in the cinema and declared that everything of the most up-to-date make had been installed.

It was clearly a spectacular cinema, and it was to continue as a significant part of the social and recreational life of the East End of Glasgow for over 30 years.

In 1955 it made a great technical step forward, separating it from its locally-owned competitors: Cinemascope. There is an obvious pride in this report¹³:

Cinemascope comes to the Olympia, Bridgeton, on Monday, February 21, with the presentation of Warner Bros drama 'The High and the Mighty' which has a cast of 22 headed by John Wayne. The presentation of Cinemascope at the Bridgeton cinema will be given all the magic, scope, clarity and technical perfection that has made this giant curved screen such exciting and realistic entertainment.

Cinemascope is a process in which special lenses are used to compress a wide image into a standard 35mm frame. Another lens expands it during projection. It results in an image that is almost two and a half times as wide as it is high. The Olympia also matched it with stereophonic sound.



It was renamed as the ABC in 1963, and its opulence is warmly remembered by its patrons¹⁴, many of whom obviously paid close attention to their surroundings:

... gorgeous and luxurious, with deep purple and red carpets, terazzo stairs in cream with black double lines going up to the balcony ... art deco lights, two square lit up green clocks at both sides of the stage... ripple curtains or festoons that got lit in different colours..the ladies toilets had white seats, now that was posh to me ... wee gold basket chairs in the balcony foyer and a matching table. Usherettes wore maroon suits and hats always smart ... not sure about the manager but uncle Mac on a Saturday minors always wore a dinner suit.

The smartness extended to the ice-cream girls¹⁵:

At the interval the ice cream girl came with a wee tray and straps round her back to sell to you, she stood at the bottom near the stage, usherettes all had wee hats on their head, men I'm sure had wine colour uniform and hats on head.

Other sources confirm both the dinner suit and patent leather shoes! The attitude of staff was well-noted¹⁶:

The ushers and usherettes ... who welcomed you on the way in, always polite and smiling.

As well as being a magnificent picture palace, the Olympia seems also to have been well run, and was considered to be a safe place. Indeed, one reminiscence¹⁷ specifically mentions the sense of safety (from gropers and strange men):

Very seldom went tay the poshy Olympia while ah wis still at school. However when ah wis a teenager ah often made ma wy back doon tay Brighton an went therr efter visitin ma Grannie. Strangely enuff ah felt safer at the Olympia thin ah did at the Wee Royal ur The Kings. By the time ah wis a teenager therr wur a lote ow creepy guys aroon..... Maybe they wur always therr but ah hidnay noticed tay then.

There were, of course, many other picture houses within the Bridgeton area, all of which were able to provide a night of cinematic "magic". However, the Olympia stood head and shoulders above the other cinemas in Bridgeton¹⁸:

Moving on to the 1940s and 50s when I was growing up in Bridgeton, the Olympia Cinema had become my gateway to the celluloid world of Hollywood. And what wonderful memories I have of those days. As other contributors to this valuable history of Olympia will surely testify, Olympia was a first-class cinema superior in all respects to the many others dotted around Glasgow's east-end.

This view is not unique: it is agreed that there was a clear hierarchy¹⁹ with the Olympia at the top:

There was definitely a pecking order in cinemas based on location, size (capacity), interior decoration and number of projectors. The standards obviously reflected the ticket price. The lower order cinemas were sometimes termed "flea pits". They had a single projector. They had wooden bench seats that sometimes were padded with hair and covered with material that was usually ripped or slashed. The toilets were primitive and not kept very clean. Further up the ladder the individual seats were padded, had armrests and had small ashtrays screwed to the back of the seats. Each row and seat was numbered. The toilets were better equipped and maintained and the interior decoration, flooring and carpeting, lighting and screen curtains all improved and became plusher as you visited the more expensive cinemas, especially those within the City Centre.

The lower reaches of Bridgeton's cinema hierarchy, such as the Premier Picture Hall (The Wee Geggie) were a bit more primitive and basic²⁰. Indeed, some of the recollections surrounding this cinema are truly mind-boggling²¹:

I remember Joe the doorman letting you in **The Geggie** via the back door for tuppence when the main entrance price was sixpence, and as there was no drinking water (cos they wanted you to buy cold drinks) when it was sweltering (as it often was) you took a handfull of water from the flushed toilet !

However, the key element was that, at an impressionable age, the cinema became a place of magic²⁵:

The famous ABC Olympia picture house.....this was my favourite picture hall and the one I attended the most, I especially remember every Saturday morning going to the ABC minors...fantastic! Long queues would form along Olympia Street all eagerly waiting on the doors opening, then the orderly rush into the plush seats. A great feeling once inside, the decorated façade, magnificent wavy purple curtain and thick cushioned seats gave this place a feeling of opulence ... The usherettes had torches and would use them to direct you to a seat and they were also used to shine on anyone being disorderly. At the interval the Usherettes would walk the full length of the cinema carrying a tray of goodies.

Clearly the Olympia made a great impression on the young Will McArthur, with his references to "plush seats" which were "thick-cushioned" and the "magnificent wavy purple curtain". One can understand his response to this "feeling of opulence". This Olympia was, indeed, a magical place.



The Olympia had a programme of films, appropriate for youngsters, which was full of adventure and derring-do, and the ABC Minors at the Olympia became an important (and constant) part of many young people's lives²⁶:

We went to the minors every Saturday morning we saw a couple of cartoons. I liked Casper the friendly ghost, they were also a couple of fighters like batman and superman and my favourite was rocket man, then there was also a film usually Cowboys and Indians, or a pirate film ...

As can be seen, there was a wide variety of films available to appeal to all tastes (although respondents agree that boys were over-catered for!).

By seeing these films, youngsters would learn subliminally of courage, morality, and sacrifice, and would transfer these ideals and virtues to their daily lives (as did their parents!). Indeed, many boys were inspired (in a sort of a way) by the heroism which they witnessed on the screen at the ABC Minors:

My erse is still sore from skelping it on my way home, thinking I was on a horse. It cost sixpence to get in and I was 6 or 7 yrs old. I went with my older brother, then it was down to me to take my younger brother and then his turn, etc.²⁷

At the ABC Minors young people were also given the opportunity to show off their talent. In an early version of X-factor, the participants did their turn, and the ones attracting the loudest cheers won a prize. David Crawford²⁸ recounts that,

(At the) Saturday Minors, I used to go on stage at the interval and sing, if the audience thought you were the best, with a loud cheer, you got a free pass for the next week. I won my fair share of free passes, as did my pal Robert Clark.

One of his fellow competitors may have been Adaline Lynass²⁹ who remembers:

... going to the Minors on a Saturday morning in the Olympia, before going in we would buy a Barrs Jubilee, packet of butterkist and a macaroon bar from Maxwell's sweetie shop, I think we paid 6d to get in. I remember they had a wee dance competition and I won a free pass for the next week for doing the Twist.

Any discussion of the ABC Minors must necessarily mention Kia-Ora Golden Orange Squash (all the way from St Albans). It is advertised here in "the big transparent carton". It is described as "freshly chilled to quench your cinema thirst." Many respondents can remember the "scooshy burbly" noise as you drained the last of the drink. This noise was then followed by a "crackling" as the flimsy plastic started to collapse under the vacuum induced by enthusiastic slurping. With a big crowd of children all drinking at once, the racket must have been deafening!

The noise, however, would have been preferable to some of the high jinks found in other cinemas, such as the Royal³⁰:

My Da said they had wooden benches. He and his pals would sit on one, and leave just enough room for one person on the end. As soon as someone went to sit down they would stand up in unison and they would fall on their erse as the bench tipped up.



The ABC Minors had a monitoring system through which those children who were deemed to be responsible types were given some responsibility for the efficient running of the club. They helped to keep the queues in order, assisted the usherettes, and kept a look-out for trouble-makers. David Crawford³¹ became a monitor and "was honoured to have been a Monitor. It

Never one to change winning tactics, the Olympia soon had Beauty Contests as a regular feature. Sometimes the prizes were not quite so grand:

This report concerns the local heat of the Neptune's Daughter Beauty Contest (Neptune being an excuse to have the contestants wearing bathing costumes?) The photograph shows the winner of the heat, Miss Ella Williamson of Kinning Park. The three judges were volunteers from the audience and their duty was to ascertain which entrant received the loudest and most sustained applause. Despite the arbitrariness of the judging system Miss Williamson was awarded a Toni Home Perm, a case of fruit drinks, a bottle of Peter Claridge perfume and a month's pass to the Olympia. The presentation was made by Roy Davis and Harry Haddock of Clyde Football Club.

FRIDAY, JUNE 30, 1950

Price Two Pence

and His Orchestra

W OUT

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Cinema-goers select their beauty queen



THE WINNER of the local heat of the Neptune's Daughter Beauty Contest, which took place in the Olympia Cinema, Bridgeton Cross, last week, in conjunction with the showing of the film of that name, was decided on Friday night. The lucky girl was Miss Ella Williamson, of 106 Cornwall Street, Kinning Park.

Miss Williamson now goes forward to the District Heat to be held in the Regal Cinema on August 24. The runner-up was Miss Lilian Taylor, of 18 Ronald Street, Townhead.

The winner received a Toni Home Perm, a case of fruit drinks, a bouquet of flowers, a bottle of Peter Claridge perfume, and a month's pass to the cinema. Miss Taylor also received a gift. Both presentations were made by the well-known Clyde footballers Roy Davis and Harry Haddock.

The four girls who appeared on Friday night were all winners of the preliminary heats held from Monday to Thursday of last week. One woman and two men from Friday night's audience volunteered to act as judges, but their duty was to determine which entrant received the loudest and most sustained applause.

PRINCESS WILL RECEIVE SCROLL OF FRIENDSHIP

WHEN the World Conference of the Girl Guide Association, which is being held in Oxford next month, comes to a close H.R.H. Princess Margaret will receive "Messages of Friendship" from British Guides to be handed to representatives of 26 nations.

Photo courtesy of Olympia Cinema

Occasionally, the Olympia would offer programmes which were rather unanticipated. In November 1950, for example, it offered "The Gorbals Story", performed by the Glasgow Unity Theatre Players for a six-day run. This is more significant that it appears.

The **Glasgow Unity Theatre** was a left-wing political theatre group that was formed in the early 1940s. It developed from workers' drama groups in the 1930s, seeing itself as using theatre to highlight the issues of the working class being produced by and for working-class audiences. It was formed as an amalgamation of the Workers' Theatre Group, the Clarion Players, the Transport Players and the Glasgow Jewish Institute players, and had strong connection to the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Left Book Club. Its personnel were ordinary working people whose everyday life was identical to those of its audiences, also drawn from the working classes.

In the summer of 1946, the company presented Robert McLeish's *The Gorbals Story* at the Queen's Theatre in Gallowgate. The play went on to achieve critical and popular success, culminating in performances at the Garrick Theatre in London in 1948. It was later made into a film and released by New World Pictures in 1950.

old film on the telly like The Bowrey Boys or Gunfight at OK Corral and you think 'I seen that in the Plaza!'

There was a clear view about relative quality and there is unwitting testimony in this response³⁹ about where British films stood:

We usually went in when the picture wis playin, an left when we got tae the same bit. No sure why we never checked the times an went in at the beginning. Mibbe something tae dae wi no getting hame too late. An we always had a 'big' picture an a 'wee' picture. Maist often the big picture wis American an the wee picture was British.



Respondents were asked the favourite movie stars of their youth. There were many responses and much over-lapping of names. However, the names mentioned are very interesting in that not one British film star is mentioned. The names were household names at the time.

Among the male actors are: Clark Gable, Roy Rogers (and Trigger!), Dale Evans, Glen Ford, Steve Reeves, Fred Astaire, Rock Hudson, Tyrone Power, Jeff Chandler, Tony Curtis, and Cary Grant (British, but another complete Hollywood star),

The photograph of Tony Curtis shows the chiselled, and slightly menacing looks characteristic of a 1950s Hollywood heart-throb. The same look can be found in others in the list, such as Jeff Chandler, Rock Hudson and Glen Ford.



There is an absence of male British stars. Where are David Niven, Kenneth More, John Mills, Michael Redgrave, or Trevor Howard? None of these names made it to the respondents' list of favourite stars. One can ask for a reason but it's a no-brainer. The British stars simply do not have the star quality of the Americans.

Here is Kenneth More, one of Britain's major film stars, with the sort of look which can only be completed with a military uniform. There is no undercurrent of danger surrounding him and he does not seem to be the sort of character who would rabbit-punch a policeman. What man would choose to be Kenneth More rather than Tony Curtis?



Among the female actors mentioned most frequently by respondents are Barbara Stanwyck, Doris Day, Kim Novak, Debbie Reynolds, Ginger Rogers, Liz Taylor, Natalie Wood, Pier Angeli, Jayne Mansfield, Doris Day, Lauren Bacall, Jean Simmons, and Grace Kelly.

While the acting ability of these actresses may be a bit variable, one of the characteristics of these stars is "sexiness". There was obviously a "look" to which Bridgeton girls would aspire. The photograph of Jayne Mansfield shows the sultry and predatory look which many Hollywood stars portrayed. The perfect hair, the knowing eyes, the fantastic cheekbones, and the gravity-defying breasts all signify star quality.



The lack of star quality in British female cinema actresses is clear from the lack of impression which they made on Bridgeton respondents. There was a dearth of glamorous British actresses. Deborah Kerr was undoubtedly a star but of a very British type. Her forte was "sexually repressed but with hidden depths". Would any red-blooded Bridgeton girl aspire to be like Deborah Kerr? In terms of glamour, Diana Dors was Britain's sex-kitten, but she has look of the girl-next-door trying a bit too hard, compared to the "effortless" sexiness of Jayne Mansfield.

The Death and Rebirth of the Olympia



furniture warehouse. It did not make much impression as a furniture store, with few respondents claiming to have ever patronised it

The Olympia continued as a significant part of the social and recreational life of East End Glasgow until March 1974 when it closed. The last showing was on 9 March 1974, when it showed "Cleopatra Jones" and "Enter the Dragon". At the end of its life as a cinema it was described as "minging".⁴⁰ It was a sad end indeed to a glorious building. There was a slight rise in its fortunes in 1977 when it obtained B-listed status. Unfortunately, B-listing status does not ensure preservation. From 1978 it was re-opened as a bingo hall, and later as a



Bridgeton - now becoming an eyesore."

The Olympia became more and more decrepit. It was a sorry sight becoming, for one person ⁴¹ revisiting his childhood home area, a symbol of the urban decay which characterised Bridgeton.

My last recollection of the Olympia in all its glory was when they were showing 'Goldfinger' - the queues were massive. A few years later I headed south. By the time I came back up here the Olympia was just a shadow of its former self, a forlorn building, its majestic presence and status as a landmark (to me) along with the Umbrella in

The Olympia was abandoned in 2000. A serious fire occurred in the building on November 30th 2004, and a man who was believed to have been sleeping rough in the derelict building later died in hospital due to smoke inhalation. The roads around the building were closed for most of the day while firemen fought the blaze. The news story made the front cover of the day's Evening Times.

Decisions had to be made about the building. Should it be demolished? It had not operated as a public space for over 30 years, so, who would miss it? On the other hand, what would the



demolition of a building which had survived for almost 100 years mean to the residents of Bridgeton? As we have seen, the Olympia had been a key part of local community life.

It was purchased by Clyde Gateway in 2009, restored and redeveloped. Its wonderfully restored façade once again dominates Bridgeton Cross. The ground floor houses the local library which is also the host for MediaTheque, a vast digital

library of films and documentaries about Scotland: a nice link to the Olympia's cinema heritage. In typical Glasgow fashion, the first floor is now a Boxing Gym. The latest tenant in the Olympia is an academic department of the University of Glasgow.

The Olympia lives on!