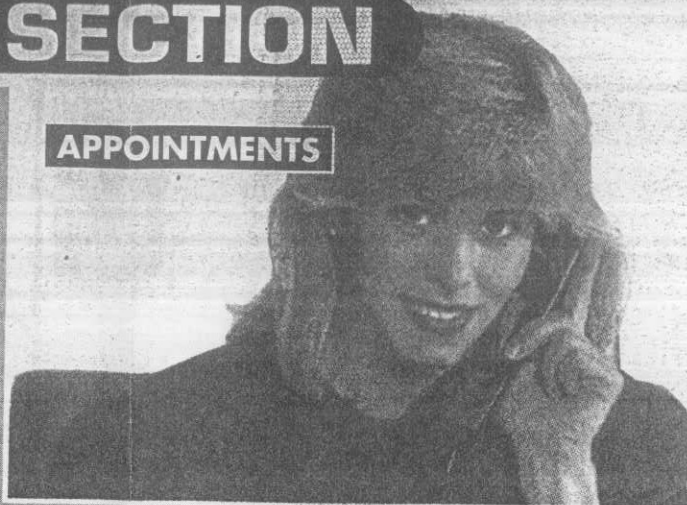


LEISURE



To the manor born, but down to earth farmers

APPOINTMENTS



Top jobs section to help you find the right career



AT one point there were 18 cinemas around Limerick. But with the advent of television and Bingo, the era of the silver screen almost disappeared. But as former projectionist, Seamus Houlihan told **IAIN DEMPSEY**, the rise of omniplexes in the wake of the individual cinema was not necessarily a good thing

Screen idles

ONE of the oldest cinemas in the country, Lees Cinema in Newcastle West, is threatened with its last picture show.

Operating as a cinema since the 1920s, Lees is up for sale for £215,000.

Cinemas such as Lees are few and far between these days—places that first screened black-and-white films, then technicolor, and saw through the different eras of Westerns and sweeping epics to the present day special-effects blockbusters.

Many a Limerick person first set eyes on John Wayne, Clark Gable and even the good 'ol US of A for the first time at Lees Cinema.

Lees is the last of the old cinemas in Limerick, which at one time, saw around 18 cinemas in and around the city alone.

Although the same amount of screens exist today—12 in the Omniplex and six in the Savoy—cinema-going has become an altogether more impersonal and packaged experience—the "get 'em in, get 'em out" philosophy, evident from the fact that we have two multi-screen, high-capacity cinemas in the city.

This was not always the case, and according to former projectionist and

ex-city councillor, Seamus Houlihan, we are worse off for it.

Seamus started his cinema career in the Carlton where he spent five years as an apprentice projectionist before moving to the Royal Cinema as third operator.

In 1953 he became chief operator and spent 18 years at the helm before calling it a day "due to the advent of television and the popularity of Bingo".

He remembers the old days of cinema with great enthusiasm and passion.

The older cinemas were usually beautiful buildings and the Savoy was probably one of the most beautiful cinemas in Europe.

"At the time shows were continuous and started at 2.30pm, running non-stop until 11.30pm. You paid your entrance money and could spend the whole day at the cinema if you liked.

"Smoking was allowed in the theatres and you'd have to watch the film through a cloud of smoke which added to the atmosphere. The cleaners had a terrible time cleaning up afterwards though.

"People used to laugh more and really get involved in the film and there was a great buzz in the theatre.



A cinema poster from the 1940s which is on display in Squire Maguire's bar in the city (LL)

"During the war years, you used to be able to pay for a cinema ticket with a jam jar as glass was scarce at the time. Lots of people have great memories from those early days of cinema," he recalled.

NOWADAYS people would prefer to have their arm chopped off having paid for a ticket rather than sit beside a complete stranger for two hours, and people are spread out with empty seats separating groups or individuals.

But Seamus remembers a time when friendships, and even marriages, started at the cinema.

"In my time the cinema was the only outlet other than dances where courting couples could go. It was a great meeting place and many a marriage was started at the cinema.

"It was more a social occasion than an entertainment outlet. I remember one time a priest asked us to get the usherettes to flash with their torches the courting couples if they were embracing in the theatre. They were completely different times," said Seamus.

The Theatre Royal, the Carlton, the Coliseum—now the Belltable—the Central,

the Lyric, the Athenaeum and many, many others which all had only one screen, used to employ three projectionists.

The Omniplex in Dooradoyle has two projectionists operating 12 screens in this day of modern technology.

"When I was a projectionist a reel of film was 20 minutes long and the average film was one hour and 20 minutes. That meant six reels per film. We would put number one reel onto number one machine and change over after 20 minutes to number two reel on number two machine and so on. They were switched over by hand.

"The thing was that it was nitrate film which was highly flammable. There was a famous fire in Dromcollogher where the projectionist had a reel on the table and put a candle beside it. The candle fell over and started a fire in which over 20 people lost their lives. Nitrate film was very dangerous but safety films were eventually brought in.

"The great thing about cinema, is that it is such wide-ranging and touches every part of life," said Seamus.

AND so what is the favourite film of an old school cinema projectionist who has screened and watched

many a classic film over the years?

"Gone With the Wind, which was one of the first colour films, is probably my favourite film. The theme music is fabulous and in my mind it is a masterpiece.

"Shane is the best Western I've ever seen and I must say most of the films I like are the older ones. I prefer the old black-and-white films and comedies from Abbot and Costelloe and Laurel and Hardy.

"There was no real sex or violence in films those days and present day films have too much explicit sex and unnecessary violence. I occasionally go to the cinema these days as I think it is a great form of relaxation but the old days can't be beaten in my opinion."

And so the sale of Lees Cinema will herald the end of old-time cinema in Limerick.

In the £5 per ticket, popcorn-strewn, huge-crowd blockbuster multiplexes that dominate the world of cinema today, wouldn't it be nice to return, at least for a while, to the bygone days of smoke-filled, ornate theatres that provided not only entertainment but also social interaction and a unique experience?

Many people, I'm sure, would agree.



Comedy duo Laurel and Hardy: many cinema goers would have seen them for the first time in cinemas such as Lees in Newcastle West and the Lyric



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