

# CAMBERWELL HISTORY

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AND DISTRICT

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## FLIGHT LIEUTENANT LESLIE KNIGHT, DSO ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE



A plaque was recently placed in Bowen Street Gardens to commemorate Les Knight, a young man who lived at 51 Bowen Street, Camberwell, Victoria. Leslie Gordon Knight was born in Camberwell on 7 March 1921. He applied to join the RAAF in 1941. Posted to 50 Squadron in September 1942, the crew he was assigned would mostly stay with him until the end. Knight survived an extraordinary 26 missions.

Knight was flying the last aircraft in the famous Dam Busters raid on the Edersee Dam, in Lancaster AJ-N. The aircraft preceding him had failed to burst the imposing concrete edifice. Knight himself had been forced to abort his first run. He was carrying the last bouncing bomb of the raid. His was the last chance at making the costly mission a success. Knight placed the radical 'bouncing-bomb' he had carried so far precisely on target. Les was awarded the Distinguished Service Order and became a national hero. His navigator Harold Hobday and bomb aimer Edward Johnson were honoured with the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Four months later, Les' aircraft was badly damaged returning from a mission. His skill and bravery were again displayed as he held the stricken plane steady to allow his seven crewmates to bail out. He steered clear of the Dutch village Den Ham to avoid any civilian injuries. The aircraft hit the ground hard, cartwheeled and Les was killed, saving the small town from certain disaster.

Unassuming Aussie pilot is being remembered for his brave self-sacrifice

# THE WAR HERO AUSTRALIA FORGOT

**T**HE bomber shuddered. Tortured metal screamed. Failing engines whined. One of Australia's most famous World War II bomber pilots braced his feet against the console as he heaved back on the control stick, struggling to keep the Lancaster in the air. "Ball out, now!" he bellowed. Pilot officer Les Knight, RAAF, was flying a four-engined Lancaster of 617 Squadron. On September 16, 1943, he sacrificed his life to save his seven-man crew — and those in an unsuspecting Dutch village below.

It was not in vain. The Victorian kept the stricken aircraft high and steady enough, for long enough, for all to scramble out the escape hatch. Knight did not follow them.

He knew the instant he released his grip on the controls, the bomber would plummet to the ground.

Knight had seen the village of Den Ham ahead. So he wrestled with his dying aircraft, steering it from the rural cluster of houses.

His crew survived. Their gratitude knew no bounds. The village of Den Ham also never forgot the courage of Knight's final act. His grave is well maintained. And a remembrance ceremony is being held on the 75th anniversary of his death.

But Australia forgot. Leslie Gordon Knight was born in Camberwell on March 7, 1921. After completing school, he took up a clerical accounting job for World War I veteran Len Carter, who soon became a close friend.

Knight couldn't ride a bike or drive a car. But he applied to join the RAAF in 1941.

His parents were sceptical. His father, Harry, told *The Sun* in 1943 that he thought his boy, who had stayed home most nights to study, could never make a pilot. He said Les had no aptitude for tools, no mechanical skill.

He was soon sent to embattled England. Posted to 50 Squadron in September 1942, the crew he was then assigned to would mostly stay with him until the end.

Knight survived an extraordinary 26 missions before being offered a secret mission. He was clearly an exceptional pilot. He was well respected by his crew.

Knight conferred with the men under his command. All volunteered to take part — even though they had no idea what they were in for.

JAMIE SEIDEL

He was a retiring type. He rarely appeared in photographs and didn't take part in celebrations when medals were handed out.

Knight won international fame for his role in the Dam Busters raid — Operation Chastise — against Germany. He was flying the last aircraft in the attack, Lancaster AJ-N.

The Mohne Dam had been breached. But the Eder Dam still stood firm.

Those ahead of him failed to crack the concrete edifice. Knight was forced to abort his first run. Tail-gunner Harry O'Brien later said he "never thought they would get over the mountain" on the other side, the Lancaster so heavily laden with the ungainly bouncing bomb.

But, under full emergency power, Knight did. And he soon nosed the aircraft back into position for a second, more dangerous, run, carrying the last bouncing bomb. His was the last chance at making the costly mission a success.

What Knight had learned from his failed first approach allowed him to place the radical weapon he had carried precisely on target.

AJ-N's flight engineer, Sergeant Ray Grayson, reported: "There were only a few seconds involved here before you get level then release — five or seven seconds. As luck would have it, we flamed her out, got the speed right, all the rest doing their job, calling the airspeed, looking at the altimeter lights and calling high or low, and we were spot on, releasing the mine and blew the bottom out of the Eder Dam."

The raid, however, came at a terrible cost. In all, 133 aircrew were involved — 53 of them died. On the ground, about 1300 were killed by the bombs and floods.

Knight was awarded a Distinguished Service Order medal for his role. His navigator, Harold Hobday, and bomb aimer, Edward Johnson, were given Distinguished Flying Crosses.

The victory was significant. But there was a lot of war left to fight. Four months after the Dam Busters raid, the elite 617 Squadron was given another difficult task. Code-named "Garlic", their mission was to bomb the Dortmund-Ems canal in Ladbergen, Germany.

It was a vital supply route. As such, it was heavily defended. Just getting there was an almost insurmountable task. The



Les Knight's Lancaster bomber AJ-N (main); the fatal crash scene (top right); his humble grave at Den Ham (left) and with his crew (above).

big Lancaster bombers had to fly at — and sometimes even below — treetop height, at night, to avoid being seen by radar and lookouts.

The pilots of 617 Squadron had been trained for such a job. But the odds were against them. And, on September 16, Les Knight's number came up.

He was flying with the same crew he had carried against Eder Dam, with an extra gunner.

It had been a long, eventful flight over darkened, occupied Europe. And once 617 Squadron arrived at the canal, it was covered in thick fog.

Knight was lining up for a bombing run at a height of just 30m when, out of the murk, a tall clump of trees appeared. He couldn't pull the heavy aircraft up fast enough.

It ploughed through the treetops, shredding the branches with the propeller blades of its own port Merlin engines and the leading edges of its wing.

Merlin engines and the leading edges of its wing.

Knight quickly realised he could not finish his attack. He struggled to keep the Lancaster stable and on course. It was a fight needing all his strength and skill.

According to the 1951 book *The Dam Busters* by Paul Brickhill, Knight radioed his flight commander, fellow Aussie Mick Martin: "Two port engines gone. May I have permission to jettison bomb, sir?"

It was the "sir" that got Martin. Quiet little Knight was following copybook procedure, asking respectful permission to do the only thing that might get him home. Martin said: "For God's sake, Les, yes", and as the bomb was not fused Knight told Johnson to let it go.

Relieved of the weight they started to climb very slowly. But it wasn't enough.

Knight's radio operator, Bob Kellow, would later recall in his book, *Paths to Freedom*, the struggle to keep the Lancaster in the air.

"We had crossed the Dutch/German border and were about halfway to the Dutch coast. We all knew that at this height and with only one motor working properly, our chances of getting back to England were slim.

"Les had asked our rear gunner, 'Obie' O'Brien, to go to the front gun turret ... 'OK, I'm in the turret, Les. What do you want me to do?' 'Good, now reach along below my feet Obie and see if you can find a loose, broken cable,' said Les. 'It belongs to the starboard rudder. When you find it, pull on it for all you're worth.'"

"In a few minutes, Obie announced he'd found the cable and was pulling it. The plane began to swing slowly to the right. It was only then that I realised that we'd been steadily swinging to the left for the past few minutes."

While the bomber could now be steered, attention focused on the engines. Things were not good.

The flight engineer warned that the starboard (right) inner engine was overheating and needed to be stopped. It represented half the bomber's remaining horsepower.

"Try to hold it a bit longer, Ray," Kellow recalled Knight asking. The tail-gunner was tiring from having to keep the rudder cable tight continually: "OK Obie, but pull on it again as soon as you can," Kellow says Knight kindly asked.

Brickhill, in *The Dam Busters*, added: "The controls were getting worse all the time until, though he had full opposite rudder and aileron on, Knight could not stop her turning to port and it was obvious that he could never fly her home."

"He ordered his crew to bale out and held the plane steady while they did."

Kellow described the fateful decision: "It was clear Les was running on a



superhuman effort ... but I knew we couldn't go on much longer.

"The plane was down to 1000 feet (300m), and the glide angle was steadily increasing ... "Send out that we're bailing out, Bob," Les said to me."

Kellow recalled the last he saw Les Knight: "I stood by him as he firmly held the wheel and tried to keep 'Nan' on a steady course, making it easier for each man to jump out. Like a sea captain, he wanted to be sure every one was safely off before he abandoned ship.

"With a last smile, I gave him the thumbs-up sign, checked my parachute and took my position at the edge of the escape hatch. Then I bent forward with my head down and tumbled out into the dark Dutch night."

The crew of Lancaster A-J-N drifted to earth in the darkness around Dam Ham. Two were quickly taken prisoner by German forces. The remaining five were found by villagers. At significant risk — they knew they and their families would be shot if caught — the townspeople hid them. Resistance forces were contacted. Underground "railways" activated. All five were soon back in England.

Knight guided the bomber towards a field for a crash-landing. But there was a ditch running along a fence line. It exploded on impact.

It left an almost unrecognisable tangled mass of struts, panels and engine parts. Les Knight's body was retrieved the next morning. He was buried in the village's old graveyard.

A Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone now stands in place of the simple timber cross which initially marked his site.

A memorial stone stands where his plane crashed.

Word spread through Dam Ham about Knight's decision to keep the plane from crashing among them. They've never forgotten.

The village organised a special event for the 75th anniversary. Families of the crew have been invited, as have those of the underground resistance members who helped the five evade capture.

A memorial plaque was also placed in the parish church of Knight's Victorian home.

Toorak RSL president Michael Fogarty says Knight's courage and critical role is still remembered by the branch's Bomber Command Commemorative Association. He's worried others will forget.

"Being a Baby Boomer, the story of the Dam Busters seemed quite futuristic, but nowadays ..." he trailed off. "Even so, I had no idea that one of the Dam Buster pilots was Camberwell's own hero. Sadly, very few aware of Les Knight's courage and the critical role he played.

"In a way, they're all heroes. My main aim is to give them some recognition, and by recognising Knight, we're acknowledging the effort of all of them."

[jamie.ackle@news.com.au](mailto:jamie.ackle@news.com.au)



Pilot officer Les Knight saved a Dutch village in the ultimate act of bravery.



## IN MEMORY OF FLIGHT LIEUTENANT LESLIE KNIGHT, DSO ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE



On the night of 17th May 1943, a young Australian pilot, Flight Lieutenant Les Knight of 617 Squadron Royal Air Force, flew an Avro Lancaster aircraft as part of Operation Chastise, a strike on the dams of the Ruhr Valley in Germany.

The Dambusters Raid as it became known destroyed the Möhne and Eder dams and damaged the Sorpe dam, seriously impairing the production of essential Nazi Germany war materiel. Eight Lancaster aircraft were lost, 53 courageous airmen were killed and three taken prisoner. Knight was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his role in the raid.

Les Knight lived at 51 Bowen Street Camberwell until he enlisted with the Royal Australian Air Force in 1941. Knight survived the Dambusters raid only to lose his life shortly after on a raid on Dortmund, Germany on 16th September 1943 at 22 years of age.

His aircraft was badly damaged in the raid. Despite this, Knight kept the aircraft stable to enable his crew of six airmen to bail out. As he lost height, Knight successfully steered his aircraft away from the Dutch village of Den Ham at extremely low altitude, before crashing and losing his life. To this day, the people of this village commemorate the sacrifice of the young Australian airman.

The Boroondara Community remembers too the sacrifice and extraordinary valour of one of its bravest citizens, who fought in the name of freedom and who gave his all for his comrades and his country.



THIS COMMEMORATIVE PLAQUE WAS ARRANGED BY THE BOMBER COMMAND COMMEMORATIVE ASSOCIATION OF VICTORIA (INC.) AND THE CITY OF BOROONDARA.





**Above Left:** Citation



**Above Right:** *Evening Advocate* (Innisfail, Qld: 1941–54), Thursday 10 June 1943, p. 4

## BACK TO THE FLICKS

### Tony Tibballs

The Cinema & Theatre Historical Society (CATHS) was formed over 25 years ago, with the aim of recording the histories of cinemas and theatres across Australia, as well as promoting interest in the preservation and appreciation of our rich cinema and theatre heritage. There is a website, a quarterly magazine and an archive totally resourced by volunteers at the Prahran Mechanics' Institute's Victorian History Library.

This article is a record of the speech given by Tony at the June CHS meeting and contains a brief outline of the development of the cinema industry and how this progressed to the building of theatres in the areas of Canterbury, Kew, Camberwell, Balwyn and Surrey Hills. Such was the allure of the moving image, nearly every suburb had a venue to screen films.

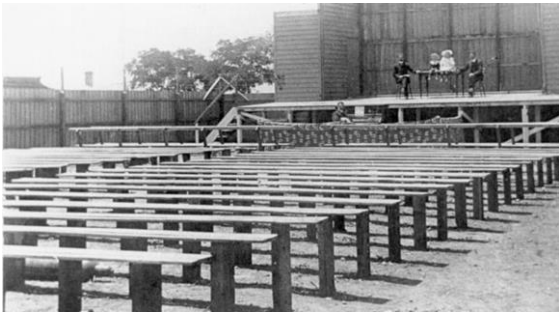
### Early cinema

The 'silent' moving picture shows in the early 1900s were very basic. The first screening in Melbourne was in 1896. They were termed 'the flicks' which evolved from the annoying flickering effect on the screen which plagued many early 'silent' movies shown on rudimentary and less than perfect adjustable equipment. At that time there was no distributed electricity, very primitive projection equipment, and most venues were not designed for this type of entertainment. However, 'the flicks' were popular with the public. They were often referred to as the 'poor man's theatre', despite tickets being relatively expensive in relation to wages.

Early film was illuminated by 'limelight' – an ignition light source using carbide or coal gas, with an oxygen combination to heat a block of lime to glow with a warm, bright yellowish light. Film at the time was of a cellulose nitrate composition, a highly inflammable material. Fires were a hazard for projectionist as well as a potential danger for audiences. Projection rooms or 'bio boxes' were built to ensure containment of any fires. It was regulation for film to be stored or transported in solid metal film trunks. It was also a regulation that there be two projectionists as well as a fireman in attendance when a cinema capacity was over 500 people. After the introduction of 'safety film', fires became a thing of the past.

'Silent' movies were mostly 'black and white'. Some were tinted and contained text on the screen but would often have a score of music or sound effects to enhance the mood of the films. This was played 'live' in the big city theatres by a small orchestra or the magnificent 'Wurlitzer' that could also mimic sound effects. In suburban theatres, it would be a piano, an organ, or a small trio – depending on the size of the cinema.

### The development of theatres in the suburbs



Theatres were nearly always close to tram or train lines for public access. From about 1910 early exhibitors used outdoor or 'open airs'. In Canterbury and Surrey Hills screenings took place from 1912 in the established gardens during the warmer months. Otherwise, flat floor halls were used. Most suburbs had community or town halls and in the country areas, the Mechanics' Institute halls were often used.

Some suburbs are very lucky in that their early picture halls used regularly in the late 1910s still exist in the streetscape, like the Surrey Hills Hall (right), even if it is used now for a different purpose. However, most have since been demolished. Early 'silent' screenings were mostly conducted by a 'circuit' exhibitor. Entrepreneurs soon started building theatres primarily for cinema, generally with little decoration or refinement, often being just bare brick walls with the back wall painted white to be the screen and only providing basic wooden seats.



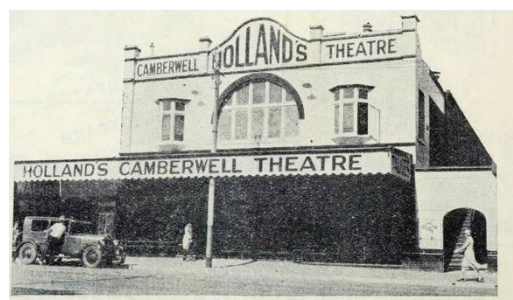
### Canterbury Theatre



The two-level Canterbury Picture Theatre building and its accompanying shops in Maling Road opened in November 1912. It was refurbished 10 years later when Hoyts took control. That building is now an antique shop which is relatively intact internally, despite closing in the 1940s.

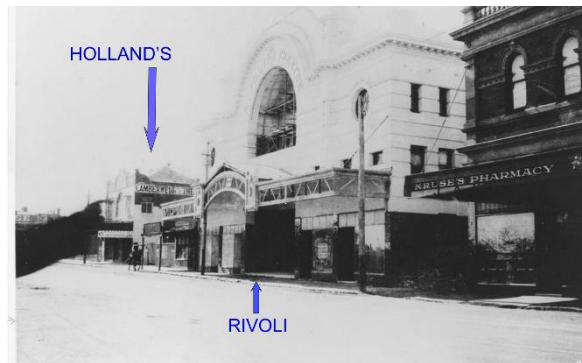
### Camberwell Theatres

In 1914, Henry Holland, a director of the City Brick Company, with his access to cheap bricks, built his own picture theatre in Burke Road, near the Junction. It was originally called Holland's, but later known as the Camberwell Picture Theatre. The theatre had tip-up seats that locked together on slides so that when one

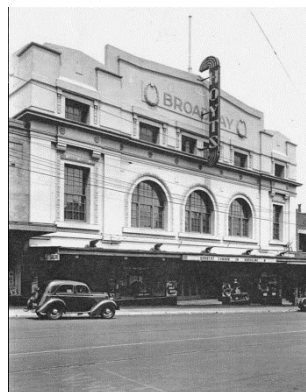


person wriggled, the vibration transmitted all down the row. The seats could be moved to make the cinema an all-purpose venue for dances and other events. This was leased to Hoyts from 1921 for 10 years but they closed it in 1927. One less theatre for audience competition would best serve all interests. The building is still there today.

The Camberwell theatre scene was very competitive as cinema patrons sought more comfortable venues. When it opened in 1921, the first Rivoli was built almost next door to Holland's. Henry Holland was in double trouble, because another theatre, originally called Our Theatre but later renamed the Broadway, in Burke Road near Camberwell Station, opened in 1921.



The first Rivoli was built for an expanding suburban cinema entrepreneur Robert McLeish. He controlled theatres in Northcote, Collingwood and Newmarket, near Flemington. This theatre had a towering Romanesque frontage with a lovely veranda. The interior was less impressive, though it did have better designed seating arrangements for optimal viewing. Apparently front stall patrons bought their tickets in the main foyer but were then obliged to leave and walk down an uncovered adjacent lane to a side entrance to re-enter again!



The Broadway was also an impressive building on the outside. Built for a local syndicate headed by Camberwell auctioneer and real estate agent Mr W.J.P. Davies, it struggled at the start, and was soon sold to entrepreneur Mr Frank Thring Senior.

By the mid-1920s the standard of films improved. Frank Thring (Snr) with his friend George Tallis, a Director of J.C. Williamson Theatres Ltd, recognised that it was time theatre design matched this improvement.

In 1925, Thring launched three Regent Theatres, the name itself denoting their aristocratic pretensions. The link with affluence was spelled out in its publicity for the Anzac Day opening of the first of these theatres, the Regent South Yarra: 'a worthy adjunct to the fashionable suburbs which surround it'. The Regent Thornbury opened in August, and the Regent Gardiner on Show Day, the only Regent in the city or suburbs to open in the presence of the Governor of Victoria.

The 1920s made going to the cinema the most popular form of entertainment in Australia, as prices only averaged one shilling for adults. By the late 1920s, 183 million cinema tickets were sold in one year when the population of Australia was only 6.4 million! Some people would go every week. Film exhibition companies were getting bigger and stronger and Australian theatre conglomerates were growing as well.

### The Regent, Gardiner



This Regent theatre was built on Malvern Road near Burke Road and the railway station, just over the border from Camberwell in the locality of Gardiner. Sydney based architect Charles Bohringer, was brought in for this assignment, solving most of the problems inherent in the first Rivoli and others that preceded it. The facade wasn't overbearing, with the money being spent on the interior.

Hoyts took over management of Holland's in 1921 and ran it in competition to the Rivoli and the Broadway.

Hoyts and Frank Thring's Associated Theatres merged in 1926. Hoyts Theatres Ltd was now the film exhibition force to be reckoned with. The iconic fishtail neon sign began to be rolled out from 1933 and was soon flashing H-O-Y-T-S on the Broadway, the Regents and the Rialto, Kew, then later also on other new cinemas to be built in Balwyn and Canterbury.

### Balwyn Theatre



The Balwyn Theatre was built by the Edmond brothers who ran theatres in Preston, Newport and Williamstown. The plans were prepared in 1927, but for a number of reasons the theatre did not open until January 1930. The interior design when it opened was similar to the Regent Gardiner. It had an orchestra and stage and advertised having a carpark. The CATHS archives are fortunate to have the original orchestra conductor's lectern.

In 1947 the Balwyn Theatre was the site of an incredible robbery, as if from a 'cops & robbers' film of its day, which involved gelignite, gunshots, four arrests and an injured policeman. It was a gang that targeted suburban theatre offices after closing. Balwyn Theatre survives today, although it did struggle through the late 1960s and early 1970s, having various exhibitors and name changes.



### **Warner Bros. Talkies**

By 1929, the 'talkies' changed the film industry. Sound was synchronised with film. Early sound methods involving the use of amplified records or discs as the film was projected. Many of the theatres required internal remodelling and renovation. Early adopters were the Hoyts Regents and the McLeish Theatres as these owners had been to America in 1929 to see the attraction of the 'talkies'.

By the end of 1930 only 67 per cent of cinemas had sound although most city and suburban venues had converted. Sound on film soon became the norm, though the acoustics of the auditoriums could be problematic.

Many theatres had to modify their interiors and improve their acoustic properties. This was also the impetus for refurbishments at the Broadway and the Rivoli theatres in Camberwell in the early to mid-1930s. Architecture in the mid-to-late 1930s was influenced by the 'Art-Deco / Moderne' style, with prominent theatre architects either creating new cinemas or changing the facades and interior decoration to this new style.

### **The Regal, Hartwell**



For lovers of cinema design the destruction of the Regal Theatre in Hartwell was a tragedy. It was on the V-shaped corner of Camberwell Road and Toorak Road. Opened in 1937, financed by Robert McLeish, designed by renowned architects Taylor, Soilleux and Overend, this was Art Deco at its best. The Regal had a unique ticket box design, a spacious roof garden, as well as a crying room – a new popular feature in theatre design that enabled mums to attend morning or matinee sessions with young children, sitting behind a sound-proof

window so as not to cause disruption to other audience members. Some theatres even employed nannies. The same team designed the second Rivoli, and both theatres should have been protected: the Regal for its pure Art Deco / Moderne aesthetic, and the new Camberwell Rivoli for its 'tricked-up' streamlined version.

### **Surrey Theatre**



The Surrey Theatre in Union Road, Surrey Hills was built in 1939 by a small consortium of locals: Dimmick & Long, Mr R. Mitchell and Laurie Rossiter, a builder who lived in Balwyn. William 'Roy' Dimmick & Long, the real estate agents who assisted in the sale of the old Surrey Hall, had the new theatre site before 1930.



The new Surrey Theatre was opened by the then Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, a week before World War II was declared. Although a modest 700-seat one-level cinema, with a corner shop, it continued screening till 1960 as an ‘independent’ picture theatre before becoming squash courts, and now apartments. Interestingly, in 1946, Laurie Rossiter also took over the Plaza Theatre in Reservoir, but sold it in about 1950 to the same company who also

took over the running of the Surrey Theatre. Knowing there could possibly be some easy and substantial money to be made from the cinema’s takings, Laurie Rossiter was targeted in a late-night robbery outside his home in Houghton Road, North Balwyn in 1946.

### The second Rivoli



The pinnacle of suburban theatre construction, the second Rivoli in Upper Hawthorn, opened in 1940. Junction Theatres were controlled by Robert McLeish, Senior and Junior. Just as Regent Gardiner put the first Rivoli in the shade, so almost every design feature seen at Gardiner was improved upon at the new Rivoli. Externally, the Rivoli building can be admired from any position. The standard of the chromatic brickwork is superb. The angular

and fully pitched roof eliminated the sound of rain in the theatre. Inside, the expansive ‘Art Deco’ foyer allows easy access to all points. The scale of the lavatories was so good that Village made no changes to them in the theatre’s makeover in 2000. Within the auditorium every exit door was a double door with an airlock, allowing no outside light under the door and thus preserving total immersion in the movie experience. It also had a roof garden. The Rivoli embodies practicality with style: superior design and quality workmanship.

### Time Theatre, Balwyn



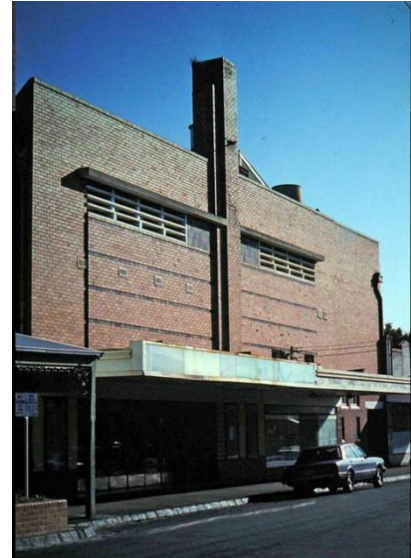
Hoyts saw the opportunity to capture a new audience in 1941. Hoyts realised that the day of Regent style was over. Economy in construction was the guiding principle. This was assisted by technical advances in moulding plaster sheeting to almost any shape and pattern, and by eliminating a true balcony and building what was now called ‘stadium’ design. The architectural firm Cowper, Murphy & Appleford specialised in this style, and the Time Theatre was one of their best

examples. The foyers had an aesthetic considered ‘homely’, with the fireplaces, vases and table lamps. The theatre was fortunate to not be destroyed by fire in 1945 when the heating malfunctioned during a cinema session, resulting in its closure for several weeks.

### **The Maling, Canterbury.**

This new theatre for Canterbury was the last built for Hoyts in its large suburban expansion program, as a replacement for the antiquated Canterbury Theatre. The Maling opened three months after the Time Theatre in 1941. This theatre was another 'stadium' design. Wartime restrictions on materials put an end to any further building by Hoyts. The Maling was Hoyts' last new cinema for 30 years.

WWII didn't have a huge negative impact on audience numbers. In some suburbs the demand increased, as the cinema was seen as an 'escape' as well as a way of seeing war footage and the news through the popular local and overseas newsreels. By the mid-1940s, most films gracing the screens were in colour. Black and white films continued to be made into the 1960s even though early colourised film had initially appeared in the 1930s.



### **'Going to the pictures'**

If you were a child, the Saturday matinee was the attraction. It was a rowdy affair. Managers and ushers dreaded the onslaught of boisterous, excited and somewhat out of control behaviour of children on a Saturday afternoon. Firstly, a cartoon would be shown, then a serial before the main feature screened. This was usually a Western that always had kids cheering or hollering at different parts of the film. Food and lollies would often become projectiles or be rolled down the aisles, forcing management to often stop the film until order was restored. Many of the cinemas attracted patronage through 'Kids Clubs'.

For adults the cinema experience was an occasion especially on the peak nights of Friday and Saturday. Bookings were often essential especially for the lounge or the dress circle. Many residents had permanent bookings for the same seat each week. Formally dressed patrons were greeted by the manager or ushers and usherettes in beautiful suits with bowties or uniforms. They were guided to their seats to wait for the film with music playing (often a theatre would still have an organist playing 'live'). The National Anthem was followed by a short film featuring the King (or later Queen Elizabeth) whilst the soundtrack played. Everybody stood to attention. Then there were the forthcoming attractions, a newsreel with the familiar opening sound of the Kookaburra for Fox Movietone News, followed by a cartoon to put the audience into a laughing mood, and finally the first feature.

In the 1940s and 1950s there were nine theatres screening within a radius of approximately 5 kilometres of Camberwell and two more in Hawthorn. By the late 1950s the experience of 'Going to the Flicks' was heavily impacted by the introduction of television. Cinema owners thought the new wide-screen format of film screening – Cinemascope, introduced in the mid-1950s – might be able to forestall the impact of the small household screen, and it was popular for a while. The diminished patronage caused by television caused many theatres to introduce restricted screenings for Thursday, Fridays and Saturdays only.

By 1966, the census showed that 80 per cent of Australian households owned a television set. The ability to afford cars had also changed the nature of leisure activities. Drive-ins became the new theatre experience. Burwood Skyline Drive-In, Melbourne's first, was opened by Hoyts in

early 1954. Drive-ins opened in Toorak in a disused quarry in late 1956, and by 1965 the Bulleen Drive-In had also opened.

The suburbs had an avalanche of theatre closures caused by economic necessity from 1959. Large cinemas were no longer viable. They were virtually empty except on Saturday nights. Hoyts closed 15 suburban theatres in late 1959, including the Maling, as well as the Regal in Hartwell. The Surrey Theatre closed in 1960, Rialto, Kew closed in 1961, and the Time Theatre lasted until 1964.



The Hoyts Broadway continued after getting refurbished with better seats, but also destroyed a beautiful 1940 streamlined decoration. An undecorated interior was the perfect match for a public only interested in image, sound, seating comfort and cleanliness. Hoyts also had the Hollywood product in new release films to sustain the Broadway till its closure in 1979.

The Rivoli re-emerged as a 'twin' cinema on Boxing Day, 1968 to reassert its premier place. Hoyts multiplex opened in Chadstone in 1987.

The eastern suburbs still have the Balwyn and the Rivoli, all now with multiple screens after their architecturally sympathetic expansions in the 2000s. The last gem from a former era, a single screen cinema, the Astor Theatre (right) on the corner of Chapel Street and Dandenong Road is the last one.

This presentation can be viewed on YOUTUBE as a CATHS presentation by typing in 'Cinemas of the Eastern Suburbs'.



## PICTURE THEATRE MEMORIES FROM MUCH MORE THAN HALF A CENTURY AGO

### John Maidment

My first memories of picture theatres in Camberwell go back to the late 1940s. We were living at 5 Fermanagh Road and at a very young age I observed the blackened, fire-damaged wreckage of the old Rivoli Theatre in Burke Road with its arched entrance. My mother bought dresses at Delphine, which was almost adjacent to the Broadway Theatre at the top of the hill. We moved from Camberwell at the end of 1949.

At the time of the Queen's coronation in 1953, we walked from school in South Caulfield to Hoyts new Glenhuntly Picture Theatre (built in Spanish mission style) to watch the event in a graphic film. In 1955 my grandparents took me and my brother to see *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*

(1954) at the Regent in South Yarra but I recall we were somewhat spooked by Captain Nemo in his submarine underwater and the giant squid and had to leave.

Around 1956-58 I went to a matinee at the sleek, streamlined Regal Theatre in Hartwell, down the Toorak Road hill from my cousins, the Walkers, in Range Street. The theatre only operated from 1937 to 1959 so must hardly have been an economic proposition: it was an architectural masterpiece and was quickly demolished.

I frequently went to afternoon matinees at the Renown Theatre in Elsternwick, travelling there on a local bus with friends from our home in South Caulfield. There were wonderful serials that we followed avidly, in particular a cowboy movie where the chief villain, with pencil thin moustache, rode his horse through a cave under a waterfall when the stone door swung back. We used to run across the road at interval and buy potato cakes from a shop with condensation dribbling down the window.

After we moved to North Caulfield at the end of 1958, most of our cinematic experiences were in Glenferrie Road, Malvern either at the Metro Theatre (which was a smart mid-30s Art Deco building) or at the rather dowdier New Malvern Theatre, at the corner of Dandenong Road.

Occasionally, we would also venture to the city, sometimes for birthday parties, and we would visit the splendid Capitol Theatre in Swanston Street (before its later mutilation) where Horrie Weber used to rise from the floor playing the Wurlitzer organ. We also visited the Regent Theatre, again a splendid building and later the Plaza Theatre where films in Cinemascope were projected on a very wide screen. Once we were taken from school to the State Theatre, at the corner of Flinders and Russell streets, with its atmospheric ceiling, to watch *Mein Kampf* (1959).

Visiting picture theatres was an important part of one's childhood and sadly young people today do not have the opportunities to share such experiences. Picture theatres were scattered through the suburbs of Melbourne and sadly only a handful remain, inevitably converted to other uses. We thank Tony Tibballs for reviving these memories.

## REPORT OF MEETINGS 2021

### 22 June 2021 Tony Tibballs - Back to Flicks in the Leafy Eastern Suburbs



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Tony Tibballs of the Cinema and Theatre Historical Society of Australia (CATHS) is interested in the beautiful architecture of theatre buildings. One of his trades was leadlight and stained-glass window restoration of historic buildings. He is a member of the Cinema and Theatre Historical Society. Tony assists with the CATHS archive and he writes articles for their quarterly magazine.

Tony Tibballs gave an enjoyable virtual tour of the Boroondara area, showing many pictures of the picture theatres and patrons. It was a real step back in time to when a night out at 'the flicks' was a special occasion. He talked about the development of the picture palaces of yesteryear in Camberwell and nearby suburbs. Unfortunately, many of the

buildings have gone, however a few remain today either as cinemas or repurposed buildings. This picture show and talk generated many memories and considerable discussion.

### **24 August 2021 Annual General Meeting**

George Fernando stated that with the AGM each year there is an opportunity to acknowledge those who support Camberwell Historical Society. He thanked Boroondara Library for their help, Boroondara Council for providing CHS with the use of the room at 25 Inglesby Road, and Josh Frydenberg and his office staff for printing our newsletter.

He thanked all those who have contributed to the running of CHS and the work we do. He thanked the committee for their work throughout the year. He then thanked every CHS member for their ongoing membership and support. George finally asked for volunteers to help scan CHS historical files.

The Committee was elected for 2021-2022 financial year and comprised: President, George Fernando; Secretary, Adèle Fernando-Swart; Committee members – Bryony Cosgrove, Alister Bennie and Jennie McArthur were elected unopposed. Peter Huggan resigned as Treasurer and George Fernando called for nominations from the members. Roy Alderton was nominated and accepted the position of Treasurer. Congratulations to Roy.

After the AGM, Christina Branagan and Nerida Muirden gave a brief talk about the work of the Boroondara Heritage Group for Advocacy and Protection (GAP). They outlined some of the streets and houses of Boroondara which the Boroondara GAP study has not identified sufficiently for protection. Examples included Harcourt Street and Roseberry Street Hawthorn, Alma Road, Spencer Road, Aroha Street Camberwell. The group has researched houses and written many submissions to Council. Boroondara Council has a new Heritage Advisory Committee.

### **27 July 2021 Steve Stefanopoulos - The Story of Stonington Mansion**



Steve Stefanopoulos is a life-long resident and former Mayor of the City of Stonnington. He is currently the Heritage Collection and Records Manager at Loreto Girls' School and oversees the operation and restoration of the internationally significant mansion Mandeville Hall in Toorak.

He presented an informative illustrated talk on the history of Stonington mansion. Steve told us about the people and institutions associated with the property, the architecture of the mansion, and the events that took place on the estate. Stonington, once Australian Government House, is located at 336 Glenferrie Road, Malvern. The Italian Renaissance-style mansion was built in 1890 for John Wagner, a partner in Cobb & Co. coaches. Stonington gave its name to the City of Stonnington.

**VALE Pauline Frances Emery, 20/02/1937 - 29/07/2021**

**Wendy Baden-Powell**



I have known Pauline for 38 years. Our friendship began in 1983, meeting on a tram together with Phyllis Calvert, the three of us going into Melbourne to attend our places of work.

Pauline was born in a hospital in Richmond on 20 February 1937. She grew up in Holyrood Street in Middle Camberwell, with her parents and with three other siblings: an older sister Carmel, an older brother Mark (both deceased) and a younger brother John. She attended Sienna College School where she became a Head Prefect on two occasions. She did well, obtaining high scores in all the subjects she took for her school leaving examinations. She attended Melbourne University where she obtained a Bachelor of Science Degree, majoring in Physics. While she was at school she studied music, learning to play the piano. She continued with this discipline obtaining a Diploma in Music. Pauline used to play the piano for an old school friend who became a professional singer. She then studied for her PhD and her work experience for this was done at the Alfred Hospital where she carried out biological work. She did not complete her PhD as she was offered a job with ASIO which she took. At that stage she was working with and designing computer programs. Her final place of work was with the Gas and Fuel Corporation doing similar work.

Pauline enjoyed life, playing the piano, dancing, singing, and listening to music classical or otherwise. She had a keen sense of humour, was very kind and warm hearted and generous with her time in helping people. She was a very caring person, wonderful company and a very dear friend. Apart from all her personal attributes, she was a keen member of the Camberwell Historical Society where she held the position of Treasurer for many years. She was also a member of the Hawthorn Glen Combined Probus Club, again enjoying all the activities which these two organisations offer, such as interesting speakers and outings.

At Christmas time last year, Pauline's health started to decline, and she died peacefully in Nazareth House on 29 July 2021. Pauline will be sadly missed by all her remaining family and friends.

**CAMBERWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEW MEMBERS**

Camberwell Historical Society would like to welcome the following new members: Mrs Meg Boyle, Mr Michael Hellstrom, Mrs Judy Johnson, Mr Gerry McCartin and Mr Ric Pawsey

## **DATES FOR MEETINGS 2021**

Meetings are currently being held via Zoom. Zoom links will be sent prior to the meetings.

<b>Tuesday 28 September 7pm</b>	<b>Stories from the members</b>
<b>Tuesday 26 October 7pm</b>	<b>Dr Lynette Russell - A Trip to the Dominions</b>
<b>Tuesday 23 November 8pm</b>	<b>Bruce Watson - Early sound recordings 25 Inglesby Road, Camberwell</b>

## **CAMBERWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY DONATIONS TO THE COLLECTION**

Camberwell Historical Society welcomes donations of the following items relating to the former City of Camberwell: photographs and prints, documents, letters, diaries, maps, plans, books, pamphlets, and reminiscences of former residents and people who worked in the area.

Contributions to *Camberwell History* contain the opinions of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Camberwell Historical Society, its committee or members.

## **CAMBERWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY SUBSCRIPTION RENEWALS 2021**

Camberwell Historical Society's financial year operates from 1 July to 30 June. Subscriptions for the 2021 – 2022 financial year are due and payable from 1 July 2021. Single \$30, Family \$40. Camberwell Historical Society, BSB 633-000 Account No 142260678 Cheques to Camberwell Historical Society, PO Box 1274, CAMBERWELL 3124

## **CAMBERWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC**

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Committee members — Bryony Cosgrove, Alister Bennie and Jennifer McArthur  
*Camberwell History*: Editor — Adèle Fernando-Swart**

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