

# MANLY CINEMAS

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## INTRODUCTION

Today in 2018 Manly is vastly different to the Manly I grew up in the late 1930s, 1940s and onwards. The cinemas, or picture theatres, as we called them, visited in my early childhood and later have vanished. My mother was born in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and so she spoke of seeing our earliest Australian films, such as *Soldiers of the Cross*. This was an illustrated lecture, with glass slides with short dramatized film segments and orchestral or choir music relating to the biblical stories of Christ and the early Christian martyrs. It was made by the Limelight Department of the Salvation Army and released on 13 September 1901, produced by Herbert Booth with a budget of £500. While some glass slides of the production team remain no motion picture film survives. While not the world's first feature film as sometimes claimed, it has been argued it is the first narrative drama film presentation. I also recall my mother speaking of seeing Pavlova dance on the stage in Sydney, in fact the famous ballerina visited with tours in 1926 and 1929. The first ballet performances were in Melbourne and at its end, when very tired, the ballet travelled by train with all the luggage to Albury, where the train had to be changed, to proceed to Sydney. The company arrived at Central on 16 April 1926. I am not aware during which tour my mother saw Pavlova dance, and as a child it all seemed such a remote time to me. This, of course, is the passage of time, so my memories of childhood visits to Manly's cinemas are also remote from today's world.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF MANLY CINEMAS

While memories of the New Manly, Rialto, Embassy and later the re-opening of an old theatre on the beach frontage, which later became the Odeon, remain a

name also later adopted by the Embassy, there is an interesting history of Manly's cinemas.

According to others seeking the history of the cinemas, it appears that the Britannia Theatre may have been the earliest, built in 1915 and operating by June 1916, located in Sydney Road, just back from Manly's famous Corso. Of course, the early films or visiting a theatre to see a film was also said to be going to *the flicks*, the term derived from the fact that the early moving films did flicker. As historian and former book publisher Alan Sharpe wrote in his book on Manly in 1983 *Movie house history had its genesis with the Manly Flickers which took place under the stars on an empty block across from the ocean beach. When rain began to wash out performances it was decided to erect a tent. In 1909 the operation was taken over by the Minns Brothers who stamped out sheets of tin to resemble castle turrets and placed them in front of the canvas. Moving pictures had caught on and soon the audiences had to be properly housed. The Britannia, later the Olympic, was built behind the Steyne Hotel in Fountain Street (later Sydney Road). The Arcadia appeared next door to the Steyne Hotel, facing the beach. It would later be modernised and saw out its last days at the Silver Screen.*<sup>1</sup> In Raglan Street the Dungowan was a familiar building, where often end of school year dances were held in the 1950s and earlier. Dungowan Ltd., converted the Paramount Picture Theatre next door into the Cabaret Dungowan where grand social occasions were celebrated. The Bijou Theatre entertained audiences with a bio tint called 'A Trip to the Moon'. The 32 moon scenes included photographs of its inhabitants, which audiences found 'weirdly delightful.'<sup>2</sup>

*Then there was the New Manly, later taken over by Hoyts, which was opposite the tennis courts in Belgrave Street. The old carousel building, where Manly Mall now stands, was converted to the Rialto, which became the Odeon in 1949. In 1960 the Embassy, across from the ferry, began calling itself the Odeon. This cavernous picture theatre opened in March 1933 as a splendid example of the Hollywood-style architecture of the period, was to be the last of Manly's picture shows.*<sup>3</sup> There is, of course, a history behind each of these picture theatres.

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<sup>1</sup> *Pictorial Memories Manly to Palm Beach*, Alan Sharpe, Atrand Pty., Ltd., 1983, 1983, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Heritage – Manly Walk.

<sup>3</sup> *Pictorial Memories Manly to Palm Beach*, Ala Sharpe, Atrand Pty. Ltd., 1983, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1993.

## THE PAVILION, MANLY

In 1906 the *Sydney Morning Herald* carried the following notice – At the Pavilion Theatre, Ocean Beach, Manly, a change of artists and new living pictures by the lifescape drew a crowded house on Saturday. Besides old favourites, Mr. Leslie Holmes and Miss Lynn Turner appeared with success. In the comedietta, Mr. Roland Stavely and Mr. Hardmann assisted the company, making a good and all-round cast for “The Coming Man.” Playgoers are provided with of programme every Saturday and Wednesday nights.<sup>4</sup>

In 1911 the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported *Pantomime At Manly* – Mr. Stanley McKay’s newly-organised company commences a season of pantomime to-nigh, in the theatre at South Steyne, Manly Beach when “Little Bo-Peep” will be staged. The music in the extravaganza will be bright and sparkling, and plenty of fun is promised. The new cast will still include Miss Ruby Davies as Jack, and Misses Marjorie Dainton (“Little Bo Peep”), Lily Harvey (Simple Simos), (sic), Ada Downes (Princess) and Messrs. George Harpur (Dame), Charles Moody, and Messrs. Morris and Vernon (comedy acrobats), ending with a transformation and harlequinade. Daily matinees as well as evening performances will be given.<sup>5</sup>

This entertainment mentions no film and the theatre may have been the auditorium arch where concerts were also held in the 1940s, perhaps earlier, at the end of the promenade at South Steyne, close to the Surf Club building.

## THE ARCADIA

It is claimed the Arcadia was the first indoor cinema in Manly, built in 1921 at 42 North Steyne, opposite the beach and the famous Manly Norfolk pines. However, it would appear the Britannia pre-dated the Arcadia.<sup>6</sup> In 1925 the *Daily Commercial News*, reported *NEW COMPANIES - Manly Theatre, Ltd.- Capital, £7000 in £1 shares. Objects are to acquire those properties known as “The Rialto,” “Arcadia” and “Olympic” Theatres, at Manly, and to carry on as theatre, music hall and moving picture theatre proprietors, etc. First directors*

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<sup>4</sup> Trove - *Sydney Morning Herald*, Monday 26 November 1906, P.3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. - Saturday 23 December 1911, P.17.

<sup>6</sup> See item on Britannia below.

are W.G. Smythe, J.C. Ruhie, and L.G. Henderson. Registered office, Manly. Registered October 24.<sup>7</sup>

In 1918 at the end of World War I a Sydney newspaper reported in *Bowls Gossip* a visit to Manly of from soldiers from Randwick Hospital. The men were guests of the Manly Bowls Club and picked up at the ferry wharf at Manly and driven around Manly. They were *entertained at the Spey, West Esplanade* at a dinner which was *done splendidly...the table decorated from end to end with flowers, leaves and evergreens... An hour of jollity, choruses and song, in which the president of the club took a prominent part. They were escorted to the Arcadia Picture Theatre, where the manager (Mr. Mumford) had kindly reserved 30 seats in the dress circle free of charge. After the pictures the soldiers were accompanied to the boat, and started on their way amidst (sic) loud cheers. A pair of bowls, donated by Mr. W. Perry, were handed over to Mr. Harris, who is managing the bowling tour of the soldier. Manly won the match.*<sup>8</sup>

In 1933 the *Sydney Morning Herald* advised MANLY PLAYERS' CLUB "It's a Wise Father" will be staged by the Manly and District Players' Club at the Arcadia Theatre, on May 13, 15, 16, 17 and 18<sup>9</sup>.

In October the same year the *Herald* again advertised FOLLOW THROUGH The musical comedy "Follow Through" will be presented by the Manly Daily Players' Club at the Arcadia Theatre, Manly on Monday night and the four nights following<sup>10</sup>.

The Arcadia's owners changed various times, and I do not recall it being open in the 1940s, but in 1948, after remodelling, it opened as the Century Theatre. Here were viewed various films, including Laurence Oliver's *Henry V*. In 1950 it was sold to MGM and joined the chain of Metro theatres circuit, with MGM operating the theatre until 1971, when it was renamed the Silver Screen Theatre, under a new owner. It closed in 1980 and the building became a night club and pinball arcade but was demolished in 2000.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Trove – *Daily Commercial & Shipping News*, Sydney, New Companies, Tuesday 27 October 1925, P.4. See in following Rialto Theatre for information on WG Smythe.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid - *Arrow*, Sydney, Friday 14 June 1918, P.6, Bowls Gossip.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. - *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 6 May 1933, P.8.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. - *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 23 October 1933, P.10.

<sup>11</sup> Google – History of Manly Cinemas, John Gleeson.

## THE BRITANNIA/OLYMPIC THEATRE

As stated previously the Britannia was built in 1915, designed by architects Hassall & Stockham, one year into World War I, and was in operation by June 1916. It stood on today's Sydney Road, (Nos. 4-10) earlier known as Fountain Street, just a little down from the Manly Corso. As a child I would look up at the building's façade as it then still carried the theatre's name as Olympic and my parents said it had been an early picture theatre. In 1920-1921 it was then known as the Britannia De-Luxe and featured a grand symphony orchestra to accompany the films, these would have been the early silent films, which were



Figure 1 Britannia/Olympic Theatre

often accompanied by a pianist. In 1923 the theatre reverted to the name Britannia Theatre when it passed into the hands of the Smythe family. The following year, 1924, it was renamed the Olympic Theatre, apparently celebrating the success of the Australian athletes in the 1924 Paris Olympic Games. In 1928 builder R. Ferguson, of Rockdale, is reported to *effect alternations of the Olympic Theatre at Manly (Sydney),*

*supervised by Architects Kaberry and Chapel*<sup>12</sup>.

Early in 1920 *The Sun* headed an item *Picture Shows, concerning a co-operative scheme in Sydney, Hobart, Brisbane and Adelaide by picture show exhibitors to form a company for the purpose of buying and controlling the films necessary for presenting their own programmes, and supplying themselves with all requirements in their own business. Applications for the scheme included the Arcadia, Manly*<sup>13</sup>. In 1922 *The Sun* reported *SALE AT MANLY* revealing the sale to the Hotel Steyne for £64,000 and Arcadia Picture Theatre, Manly £10,000. The block of land adjoining the Britannia Picture Theatre, in *Sydney-road, was sold for £1500 - £173 a foot.*<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Trove – *Construction and Local Government Journal*, Wednesday 19 September 1928, P.16.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. - *The Sun*, Monday, 22 March 1920, P.5.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. Wednesday, 6 September 1922, P.7.

The Smythe family became more involved with Manly's picture theatres, including with the Rialto on the Corso and in 1933 they opened the Embassy opposite the wharf area on the East Esplanade.

The Olympic Theatre became for a period a live theatre with variety acts. However, in 1935 the *Sydney Morning Herald* advised N.S.W. POLICE CHOIR. *The funds of St. Matthew's Farm for unemployed youths, at Manly, will benefit by a concert to be given on Monday evening in the Olympic Theatre, Manly, by the New South Wales Police Choir. The programme includes many popular numbers, solo and chorus.*<sup>15</sup>

The theatre closed in the 1930s and was sold to Dobbs Bros., who had furniture stores in Manly. The building still existed in 1954 when Walton's department store was operating there and by the 1970s the building was an auction room. It was later mostly demolished for the new shopping arcade, with the original façade still at the entrance to the Pacific Point Arcade on Sydney Road.<sup>16</sup>

#### THE RIALTO ON THE CORSO

The Rialto on Manly's Corso was a popular and familiar picture theatre in the 1940s, its street facade highly decorated and inside on one wall there were a series of tapestries hung depicting scenes of Venice. The Corso was so familiar with Cooper's Department Store and Little's, the gentlemen's outfitters. During WWII Littles had an air raid shelter to the rear of the store and if a warning war siren sounded, customers were escorted to the shelter.

The Rialto *opened on 24 August 1923*<sup>17</sup> on the site of the earlier Carousel with *two films*, as was normal at the time, *Sherlock Holmes, starring John Barrymore and Thirty Days featuring Wallace Berry. On the single floor of the Rialto seating was provided for 1,240 patrons, all on a single floor, and there were boxes located on the side-walls. The cinema boasted a sliding roof, which was opened on warm nights. It was independently operated.*<sup>18</sup> That year the *Evening News* reported "NOT FAIR SHOW" At Manly Pavilion SUBSIDISED CONCERTS – Concerns which are providing Manly with amusements protested to the council last night against the practice of granting to the Municipal Band

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. - *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 31 August 1935, P.14. An area between Cromer, Dee Why, and Wheeler Heights is called St Matthew's Farm.

<sup>16</sup> Google – History of Manly Cinemas Facebook, contributed by Ken Roe; Movie Theatres in Manly, NSW – Cinema Treasures.

<sup>17</sup> Alan Sharpe gives a date of 8 August 1925.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

the Esplanade Pavilion rent free and in addition giving subsidy. It was contended that this was distinctly unfair.

The band, it was said conducted vaudeville shows in the Pavilion and was guaranteed by the council against loss of up to £100, the council sharing in any profits that might be made.

The Pavilion was featured the previous month in the "Evening News" and called *Manly's White Elephant*.

Those who protested were The Manly Follies (The Serenaders), Smythe Bros. (Rialto and Arcadia Theatres), W.M. Myers (Cabaret Dungowan), and many other business people...<sup>19</sup>

In 1925 the *Sydney* carried an item entitled *THEATRICAL VENTURE PARTNERSHIP THAT FAILED*. This long report referred to an examination by Mr CFW Lloyd, official assignee, before the Registrar in Bankruptcy of Morris Rosenthal, a single man, said to be in partnership with Lewis John Reading, and was lately carrying on business at the Rialto Theatre, Manly. Rosenthal had *joined Reading on 26 September that year of 1925 as a partner in a theatrical venture, known as the Morris Rosenthal Theatrical Enterprises, and they produced plays at the Rialto Theatre. When he joined Reading he had no capital; Reading had about £500. Prior to joining Reading he worked for his father as an assistant salesman in a pawnbroking business at a wage of £5 a week. There was no deed of partnership between him and Reading. Instead of paying rent for the Rialto Theatre they were to receive 50 per cent of the gross takings.*<sup>20</sup> This was later increased to 60 % percent, and Smythe Bros., owners of the Rialto, was to receive 40 %, with a minimum to Smythe Bros., of £125 a week. The rental of the theatre was £25 a week. *After five and a half months they left the Rialto and moved to the Palais, the rent of which was £50 a week. The partnership between Rosenthal and Reading lasted about seven and a half months and during that period the liabilities amounted to £834. The immediate cause of the bankruptcy was the high rent, which they had to pay to Smythe Bros.- £125 a week on an average. Smythe Bros., who received as much as £185 a week, paid £28 a week for the Rialto, and rates and taxes would bring it to about £33 altogether. The partnership expenses were about £350 a week on an average. The lowest week's takings were about £220, and the highest about £580. He*

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<sup>19</sup> Trove – *Evening News*, Wednesday 19 December 1923, P.7.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. – *Sydney Morning Herald*, Wednesday 16 September 1925, P. 10 – Manly Theatrical Venture.

*(Reading) realised that the percentage arrangement with Smythe Bros. was out of question for the success of the show. He had had previous experience in that class of theatrical venture in California, as well as in Australia. While carrying on the theatrical business at Manly, they borrowed £350 from Smythe Bros., for which they gave a p.n. No portion of that money had been repaid. His (Reading's) mother advanced him £41 about May last, and Dr. Reading, his partner's brother, advanced the partnership £100 about the same time. At the present time he was working for his mother.*<sup>21</sup>

Lewis John Reading said the evidence given by his partner (Rosenthal) was in the main true and correct. *Before he (Reading) joined Rosenthal he was a medical student. While he was a student at Melbourne University in 1917 he enlisted, and was away at the war about two years. He came to Sydney two and half years ago, and started a real estate business with his brother, Hyman Reading. When he joined Rosenthal he was at the Sydney University, but gave up his medical studies. His separate statement of affairs showed £170 separate liabilities, one of which was an amount due to the Repatriation Department in respect of an advance to him in 1919 for vocational training. The Repatriation Department gave all returned soldiers at the University £2/2/ a week while there – that went on for some time, and amounted in all to £118. It was to be repaid when they got through their medical, or as soon as they got a position after passing the examinations. When he joined Rosenthal he had no capital, and his brother, Dr. Reading, made him a gift of £350. Dr. Reading had also practically guaranteed to pay his private accounts.*<sup>22</sup>

Who were the Smythe Bros.? A search of the Sands Directories of the period of the 1920s reveals various entries for people in Manly named Smythe and entries in 1924, 1925 1927 and 1931 for Smythe Bros., picture theatre, 76 Corso, Manly. However, another newspaper item in 1926 identifies the proprietor of the Rialto on the Corso as William George Smythe. This item in the *Evening News* entitled *MOVIE TAKINGS TAXATION PROSECUTION* states *WILLIAM GEORGE SMYTHE proprietor of the Rialto Theatre, Manly, was fined £20 at the Central Court to-day for having furnished to the Deputy Federal Commissioner of Taxation, an untrue return of admissions to the theatre for the week ended August 15, 1923. Smythe pleaded guilty appeared at the Central*

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Summer Court on 20 May 1962 and pleaded guilty and was fined (as above) £20, with 8 shillings cost, in default of two months' imprisonment.<sup>23</sup>

*It was stated for the prosecution that a picture was exhibited at the theatre on percentage terms with a film exchange. On investigation it was found that the returns received by the firm company from Smythe for the week in question did not agree with the return forwarded to the department. The return sent to the department showed a considerable shortage.*<sup>24</sup>

From his death in 1951 at 80 years of age a notice in the *Sydney Morning Herald* George Sydney Smythe would give a birth year as 1871.<sup>25</sup> He died at Manly District Hospital, late of Headland Road, Dee Why. The funeral left Wood Coffill Chapel, Belgrave Street, Manly for the Northern Suburbs Cemetery. His place of birth has not been located, but his parents are said to be George and Jane Smythe.<sup>26</sup> His wife, Alice Maud, nee Sintel, whom he married in 1901<sup>27</sup>, had pre-deceased her husband.

Interestingly, the Sands Directory lists Smythe in 1919 to 1921 at 16 High Street, Kogarah, above Smythe HJ, Picture Show, Armidale, in 1924 Smythe HJ had a picture show, Grafton. Also, in 1931 Smythe Bros., picture theatre at Wagga Wagga. In 1925 and 1931 Smythe Bros., picture theatre, 76 Corso, Manly, is listed in the Sands Directory. In 1930 Both George Sydney Smythe and his wife, Alice Maud, are listed at 9 Clarence Street, Penshurst, with his occupation as lithographer,<sup>28</sup> the same occupation given on the NSW Index to Deceased Estates, granted on 8 October 1951. In 1943 George Sydney and Frederick William Smythe are listed at *Alberres*, Headland Road, Dee Why,<sup>29</sup> presumably after the death of GS Smythe's wife.

Back in the 1920s the world of entertainments and films continued at the Rialto on the Corso and in 1925 *A picture night in aid of the Manly Women's Association will be held at the Rialto Theatre, Manly, next Thursday night.*<sup>30</sup> In 1926 a notice advised *Sunday at 11 am and 7.15 pm St Barnabas Church, Ashfield, Bible class and solos, organ recital. Evening after church service,*

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. *Sydney Morning Herald*, Friday 21 May 1926, P.14.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. - *Evening News*, Sydney, Thursday 20 May 1926, P.8.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. - *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 June 1951 – Family Notices. A death notice also appeared in the *Manly Daily*.

<sup>26</sup> Ancestry.com.au – hinezy 1962, released 2014.

<sup>27</sup> NSW BDM Reg. 1715.

<sup>28</sup> Sands Directories.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Trove – *The Sun*, 13 September 1925, P.22.

*Manly Band from Rialto Theatre, Manly.*<sup>31</sup> In 1927 the *Sun* newspaper advised *Latest films – Stars and Settings Good Shows to See - Wallace Berry – John Gilbert – Bebe Daniels – Buck Jones. Those who remember Pauline Frederick who visited Sydney some time ago, will remember also June Elvidge. The latter is a frequent player in ‘Chalk Marks’ to be shown at the ... and Rialto Theatres.*<sup>32</sup>



Figure 2 Rialto on the Corso

In 1932 amongst new buildings recently sanctioned by the Manly Council it was noted additions and renovations to the Rialto Theatre, Corso, estimated to cost in all nearly £9000...<sup>33</sup> At the time the Town Clerk. Mr. Les Wellings, stated that there were many indications of a steady development of the municipality in the immediate future.<sup>34</sup>

In 1933 the operators of the Rialto then opened the Embassy Theatre opposite the area of the Manly Wharf and Amusement Arcade on the East Esplanade.<sup>35</sup> The same year the Rialto Theatre was remodelled when a balcony was added and the seating increased to 1,422, the earlier side boxes were removed.<sup>36</sup> Several country newspapers reported in January 1933 *KILLED IN THEATRE – Overbalancing while working on a scaffolding inside the Rialto Picture Theatre, The Corso, Manly, on Wednesday, Robert Davies, plasterer, of Toxteth-road, Glebe, crashed to the chairs 30ft. below and was killed. His ribs were badly crashed and a piece of chair penetrated his lungs.*

*When the men who were working close by rushed to his assistance Davies was dead.*<sup>37</sup> Obviously, Robert Davies was one of the workmen employed in the remodelling of the theatre.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. Tuesday 8 June 1926.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. *The Sun*, Friday 4 March 1927, P.20.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 September 1932, P. 4, Building and Construction...

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. Manly Improvements.

<sup>35</sup> Google – History of Manly Cinemas: Facebook.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Trove – *Singleton Argus*, Friday 29 January 1933, P.1. The accident was also reported in the *Daily Examiner*, *Grafton*, the *Newcastle Morning Herald & Miners' Advocate* and the *Daily Mercury*, Maitland.

Sydney newspaper carried advertisements of all the city and suburban picture theatres and the current films being shown, normally twice daily, with the theatre 'phone numbers, the Rialto's was XU 3427 in 1946, when *An American Romance*, and *Dangerous Passage*, were A, rated (Adult) were shown.<sup>38</sup> In 1950 twice daily the Rialto at 1.30 and 7.30 p.m. *Ronald Reagan Spring Byington*, *Ruth Hessey*, *Louisa G* (rated) were shown<sup>39</sup>. No one at the time would ever imagined the film star, Ronald Reagan would one day be President of the USA.

In August 1943 the Rialto Theatre was taken over by Acme Theatres, a subsidiary of Greater Union Theatres, but in October the same year the theatre was then taken over by Greater Union Theatres. In 1947 reportage was covered in a Newcastle newspaper that *safe-blowers made an unsuccessful attempt at the week-end to blow the safe in the office of the Rialto Theatre, Manly. The safe contained Saturday night's takings, but the explosion caused the safety bolt to drop, preventing the thieves from opening the door.*<sup>40</sup>

From March 1951 the Rialto was renamed the Odeon and ten years later in January 1961 it closed with a final screening of *Pillow Talk* and *Wild Heritage*. The old Rialto/Odeon was then demolished and in its place a shopping arcade, named La Galerie, rose in its place. The only evidence of the original theatre survives in a laneway named Rialto Lane.<sup>41</sup>

### THE EMBASSY THEATRE

As stated previously in 1925 Manly Theatres Ltd., with a capital of £7000 in £1 shares acquired the Manly theatres the Rialto, Arcadia, Olympic, with a member of the Smythe family as one of the directors. The later Embassy Theatre opened on 25 August 1933, with a Spanish style of architecture, popular at the time, and akin to some style of homes built in that period. In 1932 the theatre's creation was advised in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which stated *Mr. W. P. Holdsworth, architect, announced yesterday that arrangements had been completed, and funds were available, for the erection of a new picture theatre on the East Esplanade, Manly, at a cost of about £35,000. The building (illustrated) is designed to seat 2000. It is of Spanish design and should be outstanding in the architecture of Manly. Special*

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Monday 18 March 1946, Suburban Theatre Programmes. D

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Tuesday, 14 November 1950, P.26. See Embassy entry later.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, *The Newcastle*, Monday 14 April 1947, P.2.

<sup>41</sup> Google – History of Manly Cinemas: Facebook, Ken Roe.

*attention has been given to acoustics and to the comfort of patrons. The decorative and lighting effects will introduce some novel features.*<sup>42</sup>

The Sun newspaper reported *BOYS DELIVER OWN EMPIRE TALKS – Children from the Manly Intermediate High School gathered at the Embassy Theatre for their celebrations. A special Empire Day programme was arranged by the teachers, and patriotic addresses were given by the Mayor (Alderman P. L. Nolan); Mr. A. A. E. Reid, M.L.A., and representatives of the churches. Balgowlah school children were entertained at the local picture theatre.*<sup>43</sup> Even in the 1940s during the Second World War Manly West Infants and Primary Schools remembered Empire Day and as children in the night there were fireworks and bonfires locally around homes on Queen Victoria's birthday 24 May!

The Embassy Theatre was operated initially by the Smythe family. It was a good location opposite the Manly Wharf with the half hourly ferry trip bringing many to Manly and country people at the Easter period. In 1944 the Smythe family negotiated an arrangement with the Greater Union Theatres for their subsidiary, Acme Theatres, to carry out the film buying on their behalf. In 1948 Great Union Theatres purchased the Embassy outright, it retained its original name until the Rialto, then the Odeon on the Corso closed, and the Embassy then became the Odeon Theatre. The theatre had a range of front doors across the front, but usually only a few were opened giving access and exit to the ticket office, foyer and theatre. Once seated the theatre was a cavernous area and from memory with no upstairs seating.



Figure 3 The Embassy opposite Manly Fun Pier

caused the closure of some picture theatres and despite attempts to save the

With the advent of television, the movie industry suffered, and when television was first introduced in Sydney it was no unusual in Manly and in other suburbs to see children in pyjamas and dressing gowns, with their parents, standing outside radio/television business watching the new wonder from a set playing in the store's window. This new medium

<sup>42</sup> Trove – *Sydney Morning Herald*, Tuesday 12 July, 1932, P.5.

<sup>43</sup> Trove – *The Sun*, Wednesday 5 May 1937, P.14.

Embassy/Odeon during the 1960s the theatre closed on Wednesday 7 March 1984. Their last shows were the double bill of a popular Australian film *Careful, He Might Her You*, starring Wendy Hughes and Peter Hargreaves, based on the semi-autobiographical book by Australian author Sumner Locke Elliott. The joint film was the British film, set in Scotland, *Local Hero*, 1983. Within 12 months the Embassy/Odeon was demolished. In its place a block of apartments rose on the site, with initially space for a twin cinema. This was operated by Great Union as the Manly Twin Cinema, and it then operated as the independent Manly Cinema. This last vestige of the picture theatre on the site then closed.<sup>44</sup>

### THE NEW MANLY THEATRE

Located on Belgrave Street was the New Manly Theatre, opposite the tennis courts adjoining Manly Oval. This was the one most frequented by my family, it had a milk bar conveniently next door. An early memory is being taken here by my mother to see Shirley Temple, the curly headed moppet was a big favourite in the late 1930s when I was very young. Relatives in the USA had sent me a special Shirley Temple doll, in her white, red spotted dress, long white socks and red shoes and, of course, the head a mass of curls. They had also sent a large life size dress up cardboard doll, with a variety of paper dresses to attach to her shoulders, this hung behind a kitchen door for my amusement. There were also several books on Shirley Temple. Another film I recall seeing at the New Manly, again when young, was a musical *The Firefly*, starring Allan Jones and Jeanette MacDonald, made in 1937. The film was based on an operetta of the same name and featured Allan Jones singing *The Donkey Serenade*, which became very popular at the time. During the 1930s and 1940s Jeanette MacDonald and a classically trained baritone, Nelson Eddy made 19 films together, they were big Hollywood stars.

The New Manly Theatre opened in November 1935, the building a simple Art Moderne style by architect, David Gillespie, named the Manly Theatre but some months later it became the New Manly Theatre. On Saturdays children's films, serials, cowboys and Indians, which the boys loved, and films justified as children's films, were shown. The serials always ended at an exciting point making sure patrons returned next week for their continuation. When older myself and a girl who lived next door walked to the New Manly to see films,

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<sup>44</sup> Google – History of Manly Cinemas: Facebook. John Adey. The photo with 'Gone with Wind' is taken inside the entrance to the Embassy, showing the illuminated Manly Fun Pier opposite.

with always a lime ice cream soda in the milk bar next door before the film. My parents also attended evening viewings of films at the New Manly, I recall a Saturday evening, I must have been helping my older sister bring the washing in. While saying good bye I idly clipped a wooden clothes peg to the lapel of my mother's coat. She did not notice and was surprised when she found it pegged there on her return home. On another occasion when the national anthem was played at the conclusion of the final film, my mother stood with the audience but suddenly bowed, she hit the chap in front who turned and was annoyed. My mother apologised and said *I was just bowing to the King. Bugger the King* he replied, which really shocked her.

On another occasion there had been a burglary at our home, we were burgled on three occasions. Our house was at the end of Alexander Street and Balgowlah Road opposite the Manly Golf Links, but on the corner of today's Kenneth Road there was an avenue of large Coral trees, with a bushy area beneath and further along Balgowlah Road the open area towards a green and sand bunker. In the bushy area early in World War II Australian soldiers with tin hats with camouflage over them and painted faces trained there on a few occasions. With the burglary though my brother and a friend were attending the New Manly Theatre, but firstly had a milkshake in the bar next door. My brother suddenly saw a chap wearing his stolen leather motor cycle jacket, he



Figure 4 New Manly/Hoyts

recognised it as once as travelling to work he had an accident and the leather sleeve was grazed noticeably. He asked his mate to keep an eye on the chap and he went to the local Police Station along Belgrave Street. The police came back with him and spoke to the chap and when they opened his jacket he had burglary implements inside and was then arrested. If seated upstairs in the theatre, always at interval or before the film one could wander out onto the balcony which overlooked Belgrave Street, especially if the tennis championships were on at the courts opposite

during the summer. These attracted the top tennis players of the day. We always walked to the films and home again, about a mile distant to our home, but thought nothing of the walk. In the illustration the outside balcony at the New Manly is no longer visible.

In the 1950s when the old Arcadia/Century Theatre was taken over by MGM Hoyts soon bought the New Manly Theatre from the chain in February 1951 and changed the name to Hoyts. The theatre was refurbished and opened with a gala debut on 22 March the same year, it survived until May 1978. Then an independent operator took on the venture and renamed the theatre Flicks, but instead of movies they were replaced with rock concerts. In September 1978 Flicks closed and the venue became Diana's, a music venue. In May 1980 the building was sold and then demolished, replaced with a four-level office block named Tracon House, 101/27 Belgrave Street. The whole area of Belgrave Street changed with the years with shops such as Pit-a-Pat, children's clothing, the milk bar and on the corner of Sydney the Manly Post Office vanished, the latter built in its current position on Central Avenue. Old Manly was disappearing.

### USHERETTES

In the heyday of the picture theatres following purchase of tickets, or collection



Figure 5 Sydney Usherettes

of pre-booked tickets one was escorted to their seats by an usherette. These young women wore special uniforms and were located on the ground floor or if an upper floor, upstairs. Quite often their uniforms were attractive with a sweeping long skirt. This was also the practice in city theatres, each theatre had a distinctive uniform. The prestigious

Prince Edward Theatre in Sydney was recalled by one usherette, stand girl, as being dressed in a white ball gown and a tiara!<sup>45</sup> The Rialto usherettes, from memory, had a uniform of red and white with a skirt, not a long one, and jacket. The young women in the New Manly Theatre at one time had a long sweeping skirt.

The usherettes were an innovation from Hollywood from the 1920s and 1950s, believed to promote feminine glamour and a commanding presence during the great era of film.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Google - Prince Edward Theatre in Sydney, AU – Cinema Treasures. Now out of print *A Pictorial History of Sydney's Prince Edward Theatre Beautiful*, Barry Sharp, ISBN 0 9594252 2 5.

<sup>46</sup> See site – The history of the Cinema Usherettes.

## CHOCOLATE AND ICE CREAM BOYS

During the same era and up until World War II theatres also employed Chocolate and Ice Cream boys. These youths or young men carried a wooden tray suspended by a leather strap behind the neck and shoulders offering an array of sweets of various kinds, minties, jaffas, as said often spilt and rolling down the aisle or under seats, chocolates, a box of chocolates at the film was a special treat. The ice cream boys carried a similar tray with a selection of ice creams, ice cream buckets etc., although it was long before the wide selection of ice creams on offer nowadays.

However, with the outbreak of World War II and the introduction of rationing these special treats mostly vanished. The chocolate boy still appeared on occasions in the New Manly Theatre, but with an offering of Cure-‘em quick, Butter Menthols or Irish Moss cough lollies. On one occasion at the Savoy in Sydney, which showed mostly continental films, my mother and I viewed a French film, *Monsieur Vincent*, based on the life of St Vincent de Paul. Towards the end of the film as the actor was portraying the saint’s death, presumably from consumption, his coughing was accompanied by my mother’s cold and cough. She opened a small tin of English throat pastilles and dropped the tin with the cough sweets scattering around the floor and seats.

Today’s array of ice creams, huge containers of popcorn, and sometimes wine would have amazed the patrons of the earlier era.

## CROWN STREET PICTURE THEATRE/NORTHERN BEACHES PICTURE THEATRE, QUEENSCLIFF

As a child, together with an older brother and sister, we sometimes in the evening walked from our home on Balgowlah Road at the corner of Alexander Street down towards the Manly Lagoon and then up steps that led to Queenscliff Road and onto Crown Road, Harbord/Queenscliff. With no current recollection of any film seen at the theatre at its conclusion we walked back down the steps to our home. What is remembered though is the brilliance of the stars as we headed downhill in the dark, we often looked for the Southern Cross and other formations my brother pointed out to us and wondered about the universe.

To some the names Freshwater, Queenscliff or Harbord are obscure, but this area just north and adjoining Manly as Alan Sharpe<sup>47</sup> states *Manly had been a*

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<sup>47</sup> *Pictorial Memories – Manly to Palm Beach, Alan Sharpe, Atrand Pty. Ltd., 1983.*

*thriving resort for decades while Harbord, just to the north, slumbered in peaceful obscurity.* However, on 29 September 1815 50 acres of land opposite the beach was granted to Thomas Bruin, who, apparently, never lived there. By December 1884 it became the Freshwater Estate and in 1886 when surveyed was named Harbord. Freshwater most probably derived from a stream, now Oceanview Road,<sup>48</sup> and Harbord came from the maiden name of the wife of the NSW Governor of the day, Lord Carrington. The two names were debatable and even in 1912 when the public school opened it was named Freshwater Public School, despite calls for it to be Harbord Public School. A 2006 street directory designates Harbord as the area beyond Oliver Road, Queenscliff the area from there to the Beach, the beach named Freshwater and Queenscliff Bay.<sup>49</sup> In 1923 the Post Office recognised the new name of Harbord. However, on 2 January 2008 Harbord officially became Freshwater.

Freshwater Beach was and still is accessible, as we did as children, by bending low and accessing the area via a tunnel, sometimes called the wormhole, cut through the rock from just past Queenscliff swimming pool, said to have been cut by local fishermen to access the area more easily.

Despite searches the film theatre seemed not mentioned. However, Alan Sharpe writes that when the first tram began operations to Harbord, off Pittwater Road, in February 1925 and with a ribbon ceremoniously cut *some 250 guests attended a function around at the newly-opened New Crown Theatre in Queenscliff. The last Harbord tram moved off unceremoniously from Harbord in the predawn of October 1, 1939.*<sup>50</sup>

Sharpe continued that the theatre boasted red leather seats and two pianolas, but at the time the residential population was too small to support a theatre. The game of housie was then tried as an attraction, but that too failed. As a film theatre the site closed but then reopened as *the Blue Danube Dance Hall with the River Danube depicted on the bass drum. Its dancing life was limited and again the theatre stood empty.*<sup>51</sup>

It was 1937 before the population warranted a new attempt at a picture venture when the Northern Beaches Picture Theatre opened. This was the

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<sup>48</sup> Alan Sharpe suggests the creek was between Wyuna Avenue and Wyndora Avenue, both streets above South Curl Curl Rock Baths.

<sup>49</sup> Gregory's street directory, Sydney & blue mountains, 2006.

<sup>50</sup> *Pictorial Memories – Manly to Palm Beach*, Alan Sharpe, Atrand Pty. Ltd., 1983, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1993.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

theatre we visited during the early 1940s and although a good climb up the steps from the lagoon people tended to walk more at that time. I do not recall an upstairs area, nor anything about the interior of the theatre. Like so many of Sydney film theatres it was the introduction of television that also saw the closure of the Northern Beaches Picture Theatre.<sup>52</sup> Later it became a squash court where my future husband I sometimes played squash.

### BALGOWLAH PICTURE THEATRE

The Balgowlah Picture Theatre was located at 318 Sydney Road around the eastern corner from Condamine Street and another destination my siblings and I sometimes walked to from our home to view films. Nothing was thought of the walk, which probably took us past small Brassington Park,<sup>53</sup> later covered by the Manly Swimming Pool area, and along Balgowlah Road to walk uphill from there through various streets to Sydney Road and the theatre. The walk was not without its interest and the same I followed to school from kindergarten to 6th class at Manly West Infants and Primary School. During the war years the giant *Golf Ball*, the gasometer erected in 1931 provided gas for motor cars, instead of petrol they carried a large gas bag on the roof of the car and could be filled at the *Gas Ball*. The gas works were located above Balgowlah Road at the corner of Francis Street. Further along if following Balgowlah Road, was the Manly Golf Links Clubhouse opened on 1 November 1924. Perhaps, we wandered up past the side of Manly West School with Manly Cemetery opposite. Here in summer the cemetery was filled with yellow calliopsis, and in winter freesias were rich with perfume. My mother recalled the camels, used before the donkeys on Manly Beach, being taken home along past the peppercorn trees that lined the cemetery along Griffiths Street, the camels eating the red berries from the trees. After the films we would walk home along the same route.

Apparently, the theatre was initially an all-purpose meeting spot with political lectures, union meetings, fancy dress balls and silent movie screenings and at one time known as Balgowlah Hall. In 1929 extraordinarily, Holy Mass was celebrated at the Balgowlah Picture Theatre. This was reported in *The Catholic*

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Brassington Park was named for Mr and Mrs Brassington, friends of my mother, they lived opposite the park above on a steep slope where in the early 1940s they kept a few goats. They were well travelled and once gave my mother a carved wooden Buddha brought back from their travels. The park is now part of LM Graham Reserve.

*Press*, which revealed because of the lack in the Balgowlah Parish of any Catholic buildings the mass was celebrated thus for the last couple of years by Father Bond, a past Administrator of St Mary's Cathedral. He had helped the Archbishop for three years in an eminently successful appeal for the Cathedral



Figure 6 Balgowlah Cinema

Building Fund. Father Bond, at the time, hoped the Holy Sacrifice would be celebrated at an early date in the school-church...<sup>54</sup>

*The Catholic Press* later reported in a long article *After chafing for several weeks at the delay caused by a sequence of wet Sundays, Rev. Father E. Bond, Pastor of the newly formed parish of Balgowlah, defied the unruly elements, and invited his Grace the Archbishop last Sunday to lay the foundation stone of the district's first church-school, the latter opened with 60 pupils.*<sup>55</sup>

A cellist, Cedric Ashton, remembered playing with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in the orchestra pit at the theatre during rowdy Saturday matinees. Balgowlah had to compete with the competition from the Manly picture theatres and in November 1930 it was in liquidation. Sometime after its liquidation the Balgowlah Theatre re-opened for *talkies* and claimed *Where the Best Pictures Are Presented with Incomparable Sound.*<sup>56</sup> In 1934 architects, Herbert and Wilson were engaged to revamp the building with a modest Art Deco style.<sup>57</sup>

In the 1930s the Balgowlah Theatre was owned by Manly Theatres Ltd., who also owned the Rialto, Arcadia and Embassy Theatres. By the 1940s it was well established as a cinema and in 1946 advertised in the Sydney papers *Suburban Theatre's Programmes* the 'phone number was XU 1811 and the shows being

<sup>54</sup> Trove – *The Catholic Press, Balgowlah's News, Thursday 6 June 1929, P.25.*

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. Building's Start, Thursday 13 June 1929, P.22.

<sup>56</sup> Google – History of Manly Cinemas: Facebook.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. - Balgowlah Cinema in Sydney, AU – Cinema Treasures.

presented *That Night With You*, rated G, together with *Don Juan Quilligan*, G. By 1949 the 'phone number had changed to XJ 1811.

The Balgowlah Cinema, as it was later named, had 691 seats and survived the introduction of television, but in 1974 its sale was recorded to *Bill Glass who bought the theatre for \$1300. He installed new seating, sound and upgraded the screen. He planned to screen old time movies, much as the former Metro in Manly had done operating the Silver Screen. The Manly Daily reported the closure of the Balgowlah Theatre in 1985. Lessee Dawn Leyden said the operating costs were just too high and the property went up for auction. The last programme was the Clint Eastwood double bill 'Tightrope' and 'City Heat'. The building was demolished to be replaced with a mixed retail/commercial mini-plaza then occupied the site.*<sup>58</sup>

#### A NEW DIRECTION – DRIVE-IN THEATRES

The 1950s saw an innovation in the way to view films, in various parts of Sydney suburban areas new drive-in theatres opened. The *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1953 advised of a *Drive-In Theatre Plan Appeal* and informed readers that a Sydney chartered accountant, Mr J McFadden said he would challenge in court the refusal of the Chief Secretary's Department to permit the building of a drive-in open-air theatre in French's Forest.

Mr McFadden was in partnership with a Mr ES Clementson with a plan to establish the theatre on six acres of ground near the corner of Roseville Road and Allambie Road, French's Forest. Mr Clementson was the managing director of a Sydney building firm. Both the Warringah Shire Council and the Cumberland Country Council had approved the application, but the Chief Secretary's Department had refused it.

The theatre was planned primarily for patrons with cars who could not attend ordinary theatres because they had young families. A research organisation on their behalf had made a survey of 300 families in Dee Why, Balgowlah, Seaforth, French's Forest, East Roseville, and Brookvale areas. Each family owned a car and had children under 12 years of age. The survey further found that 66% of the families never went to the pictures because of the age of their children, and 90% of the families would attend a drive-in theatre in their locality.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

It was further pointed out that the reason why the application was refused was not known making it very difficult to prepare a case for the court. The plan for the 300 cars was to be accommodated in rows facing the screen, which would be 40 feet square and about 20 feet off the ground. Loudspeakers would be fitted in each car. The projection box and refreshment room would be in the centre of the theatre. In the front of this would be seats for patrons who wished to leave their cars and those who did not own cars.

An official of the Chief Secretary's Department said the Theatres and Films Commission decided to reject the application. The organisation came under



Figure 7 Frenchs Forest Drive-In

the control of the Chief Secretary and was a statutory body and had been in existence since 1939. Its functions included determination of applications where the screening of films was involved.

However, on 23 October 1956 Frenchs Forest Drive-In opened at Frenchs Forest Road and Skyline Place, operated by Consolidated Drive-In Theatres Property Ltd., with positions for 688 cars. It is claimed that the post war popularity of cars helped the success of the drive-in theatres. Families with children in pyjamas would drive to a theatre and each car spot had a post with a loudspeaker, which could be attached to the car. Some patrons brought fold-up chairs and bean bags to sit

outside their cars. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported at the Frenchs Forest drive-in some locals arrived on horseback!

There were some thirteen sites of drive-ins around Sydney suburbs, although initially popular the theatres declined with the introduction of colour television, then later home videos, while daylight saving did not help either as sometimes the film was delayed until it was dark enough to present the film. The Frenchs Forest Drive-In operated until its closure in 1984, when the site

then became retail office space, occupied by the Skyline Business Park and Forest Business Park.<sup>59</sup>

With time, despite a lull with cinemas, there was later a resurgence of new, larger theatres, although many of the historic city cinemas vanished. The Hoyts complex at Warringah Mall, is an example of that new trend. Who remembers that area in earlier times, when as a child one would wander along old Pittwater Road back behind today's Mall, with tales of the area's earlier name of Greendale and a brook that ran close to the home of a Mr. Parker, who accordingly named his property Brookvale?<sup>60</sup> In the 1940s the stone Brookvale House still stood, which was supplanted eventually by the Manly Warringah Leagues Club?

As with a cinema at Richmond in the Hawkesbury The Orpheum, a famous Art Deco film theatre re-opened and still operates on Military Road at Cremorne, while in 2017 the film theatre, which had ceased to operate at Spit Junction, Mosman, was demolished in conjunction with the introduction of new double-decker buses operating from Mona Vale to Wynyard, every ten minutes, along Military Road.

Joan Lawrence – 2018.

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<sup>59</sup> Google Frenchs Forest Skyline Drive-In, Frenchs Forest Road and Skyline Place; [Sydneymorningherald.com.au](http://Sydneymorningherald.com.au) - Hits and Memories of the Drive In – Blogs – The Sydney Morning Herald.

<sup>60</sup> *Manly and Pittwater, Its Beauty and Progress*, PW Gledhill, 1946. For those interested also see *Brookvale, Dictionary of Sydney online*.

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2. Rialto - Odeon Theatre – Movie Theatres in Manly, NSW Cinema Treasures.
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