

Chapter 11

ENTERTAINMENT



A film crew at work at Nettlefold Studios, Walton-on-Thames, c. 1929, with the film director Walter Forde on the left. *Elmbridge Museum*.

Surrey's proximity to London has again been a factor in the development of the entertainment industry, in its relation to the London theatre, in the location of film studios and in the prominence of Epsom as an early spa town and centre of horse racing.

Theatre and cinema

The 20th century is one in which entertainment has become an expected 'right', due to everyone. Previously, a visit to the theatre, the most common way of passing the time, was a rare pleasure, until the public houses of London offered live entertainers to cajole customers within their doors and gradually turned into the music halls. The theatres which had been in the main line of descent from Shakespeare's 'Globe' continued to offer plays debating ideas and character, but it is this type of theatre that has suffered a disastrous decline. London theatres were hit badly by the fall in attendances but provincial theatres suffered from the spread of the cinemas during the 1930s and 1940s and, in turn, the cinemas were hurt by the universal spread of television so that few remained in our towns.

Theatres have been judged to be out of touch with the lives of the working and middle classes and their expensive salary bills have made them uneconomic for the entrepreneurs to persevere with them as audiences have declined. Cinemas were seen to have more opportunities to make profits, This resulted in a decimation of the number of buildings (mostly 19th century) offering live entertainment, jollity or ideas.

Guildford has had four professional theatres in its time — the Market Street Theatre, the Theatre Royal, Guildford Repertory Theatre and the Yvonne Arnaud, opened in 1965. The last was part of a remarkable phoenix-like resurgence of theatre building in Surrey which also accounted for the Redgrave in Farnham, the Thorndike in Leatherhead, the New Victoria in Woking, the Harlequin at Redhill, and the Playhouse at Epsom. Though the Guildford Theatre has fed the London West End with many successful 'home-grown' productions and despite the fact that a lot of stars live within Surrey, yet a bleak future seems to face the modern generation of theatres without sufficient audience support and financial backing from the Government.



Staines art deco film centre.

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Old industrial premises have sometimes been converted for use by theatres, particularly community theatres, though the professional Yvonne Arnaud has used the adjacent town mill first as workshops and then as an auditorium. The small Bellerby Theatre was created in the 1970s in a former iron works in Leapale Lane, Guildford, and the 1913 Guildford Electrical Supply Company building by the river was converted and extended to form the Electric Theatre in 1996. Both are among a variety of adapted premises used by the Guildford School of Acting, which in the 1990s is gaining a reputation for excellence.

Interestingly, it is possible to make out a case for Surrey as the original birthplace of the cinema. Eadweard Muybridge (as he became later known) was born as Edward Mummeridge in Kingston upon Thames but emigrated to America in 1852 and became one of the most celebrated photographers there. Having accepted a large bet from the Governor of California, he started experiments to determine whether a running horse has all four legs off the ground at the same time by using 24 cameras each attached to a trip wire. Later he invented the zoopraxiscope to project these moving images on to a screen for an audience. In so doing he had laid the foundation of the cinema, a new method of entertaining people.¹

The earliest cradle of English film making was probably in Surrey. The location of film studios in Great

Britain was most frequently found in London and the Home Counties, often because of the availability of electricity but also because London offered a source of capital, actors, film stock and apparatus. In 1899 Cecil Hepworth, having searched the Thames Valley for a villa in grounds with power laid on, started making films in Hurst Grove, Walton-on-Thames, an ideal house in which he installed a generating set powered by a gas engine for his studio's needs. Many of his early short films were no more than exercises in trick photography but he soon turned to story films, including 'Alice in Wonderland' (made in 1903 in the gardens of Mount Felix) and 'Rescued by Rover' (1905, the best known of all his films) in which all the parts were played by Hepworth, his family and his dog. It is amusing to think that Weybridge and Walton-on-Thames served as a location for many Westerns made by Lewin Fitzhamon round about 1905. Many of the actors and actresses in his films went on to become the film stars of the 1920s and 1930s.

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After Hepworth became bankrupt in 1923, his studios were taken over by Nettlefolds who continued to produce films until the mid 1960s. Walton Studios has now become a shopping centre and the name 'Hepworth Way' commemorates the great days. However, the old powerhouse of the studios was turned into a public hall and survives as 'The Playhouse' in

Hurst Grove. In the historic county of Surrey, Croydon's contribution to the history of the cinema was also considerable. Like Walton, Croydon in those days was near enough to London but surrounded by interesting countryside. The Clarendon Company built their studio in Limes Road, Croydon, in 1904 and made one short comedy film per week in premises well in advance of their time — a large glass roof and sliding doors for the main stage, plus electric light! Although they made many historical and melodramatic films, the company failed after the First World War. The premises were taken over by other film companies — Harma and Associated Exhibitors Film Company — but eventually became the premises of an electrical engineer. The more famous firm of Cricks and Martin created elaborate studios in Waddon New Road, Croydon, in 1908 and made comic, industrial and educational films. By 1910 they employed more staff than any other film company in Great Britain. They used a lot of location shots and they also introduced the happy ending. Despite their actuality films and large spread of dramatic subjects, they folded in 1915 and although the Gaiety Company, who made comedy dramas and shorts, made a gallant attempt to continue, film making ceased there and the buildings became a garage.

In 1928 the Littleton Park Estate in Shepperton was bought by Sound City Films for use as film studios. By 1932 five films had been made including Alexander Korda's famous 'Sanders of the River' in which the tiny River Ash became a mighty river. By 1936 the studio had expanded to include seven sound stages, twelve cutting rooms, three viewing theatres and a building converted into a hotel. In 1946 the studios were taken over by British Lion under Korda; from then until 1970 there followed the most prosperous days of the studios and the British film industry. At Shepperton over 350 films were made, including 'The African Queen' 'The Third Man', 'The Wooden Horse', 'Cockleshell Heroes', and 'Oliver'. A decline in the studio's fortunes followed until the rock group The Who bought it and called it Rock City. In 1972, Spelthorne Council bought a large part of the site for housing but filming still continues by Lee International Studios, mostly for television, on the reduced site.

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After reaching its high point during the Second World War, film-going declined from the 1950s onwards and so cinema buildings started to disappear from our streets, although many of the premises still exist in a different role. As an example, Godalming has had three buildings serving as cinemas. The first, known popularly as 'Fudger's' after its proprietor, was little more than a corrugated iron shed. Although known in

its time as the Electric and the Empire Palace, it became used for commercial concerns, especially of a light engineering nature, and is empty at the time of writing. What opened as the Odeon Cinema in the 1930s became a food supermarket and the Regal, whose exterior, in keeping with the style of the old town, was stated to be approved by Lutyens,² ceased to show films in the 1970s. It became a bingo hall, lost money with the decline of this popular pastime, and has been demolished and the site used for a block of luxury flats. Staines has lost the Empire Cinema (which became a toy shop and a cobbler's), and the Majestic (demolished in 1961) but was lucky to retain the MGM Film Centre, with three screens. Ashford was unlucky to lose not only two cinemas but even its swimming pool. The same sort of story can be repeated in every town and city of this country. Mostly supermarkets have taken over; bingo has run its course too; at least Weybridge had a church converted from a cinema when The Odeon became St Martin de Porres Roman Catholic Church but this, in turn, closed when the new church of Christ the Prince Of Peace was built in 1988.

Now, under the influence of Hollywood, which always wants to try something new to rescue its position (whatever happened to ToddAO, 3-D films, Surround-Sound and SmellieVision?), the cinema seems to be making a comeback through the 'multiplex'. More small auditoria, and therefore more films offered to the public, but only one set of staff for the box-office and the projection box at the cost of at least twice the income. No wonder, then, that the cinema industry is making a profit at last.

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Horse racing

Surrey is well known for horse racing, perhaps best known for the races at Epsom, particularly the Derby and The Oaks. James I is said to have held the first horse races on Banstead Downs (as Epsom Downs were then known) when he was in residence at Non-such Palace. Before that the Downs were a popular location for foot races. In 1648 a meeting of Royalists was held on Banstead Downs under the pretence of a horse race meeting and during the Commonwealth horse racing on the Downs was a common enough event for it to be used as a cover for a secret gathering. Race meetings were attended by all social classes and large numbers of gypsies and vagrants traditionally congregated on Epsom Downs.

Epsom Races have been held annually since 1730 but their popularity really started in 1779 with 'The Oaks' race, which was named after the Earl of Derby's seat at Carshalton. 'The Derby' was first run in 1780. In



Gatwick racecourse. *John King Collection.*

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1828 Charles Buck, a Doncaster man, obtained permission to build a grandstand and this was the beginning of the various buildings which have developed on the Downs over the years. The meetings gave rise to a race horse breeding and training industry in and around Epsom and Headley.

Guildford races were held on Merrow Downs, on either side of Trodd's Lane on the site of the present golf course, from 1701 until the middle of the 19th century.

In the 18th century there was horse racing on The Tilt at Cobham but this had ceased by 1780. The nearby public house is still known as 'The Running Mare'.

Another early horse racing venue in the county was Egham where the sport first took place at Runnymede over two days in 1734 and 1735. In 1737-39 there were three-day meetings but an Act of Parliament in the following year, which restricted small race meetings, meant that racing did not return to Egham until 1770. The support was varied until 1849 when a Race Special train was run to the newly-opened LSWR station at Staines. Seven years later the railway arrived at Egham bringing even larger crowds, with an increased number of pickpockets and confidence tricksters. In 1884 the police refused to attend because of the unruly crowds and as it was considered impractical to run the races without police control the meeting was cancelled and there was no more racing at Egham.

There was a short-lived racecourse on Reigate Heath. Racing took place between 1834 and 1839 and an attempted revival in 1863 was unsuccessful.

When Croydon began to grow into a busy town its racecourse was moved in 1864 out to Stroud Green and a new railway station, Woodside, was built seven years later to serve the needs of the racegoers. This course was very successful but, as with Egham, with success came hooliganism. The course moved in 1891 to a site between Horley and Three Bridges and the London Brighton & South Coast Railway built a station, Gatwick Racecourse, to serve the racegoing public. The course was very popular, and during the First World War the Grand National was run there. The success of the racecourse helped to increase the use of the new airport which had been built nearby. In 1955 it was agreed that a new international airport would be built at Gatwick on the site of the racecourse and much of the old airport. No trace of the racecourse survives except its bandstand, which was re-erected in Crawley New Town. The new Gatwick Airport station was built on the site of the racecourse station. This area of former Surrey became part of West Sussex in 1974.

The first enclosed racecourse in Britain was built on part of Sandon farm, owned by J W Spicer of Esher Place. It opened in 1875 as Sandown Park. There are two courses here, one for flat racing and one for steeplechases.



Epsom Downs railway station in LB & SCR days

In 1877 the Kempton Park estate was for sale and S H Hyde, together with a few friends, formed a company to design, build and operate an enclosed racecourse similar to that at Sandown Park. The first meeting was held in the following year, and at the same time a railway station was opened on the Shepperton branch line near the grandstand. Traditionally, Kempton Park charged lower entrance fees than Sandown Park and the course became very popular. In 1932 the grandstand burnt down but was replaced in time for the next year's meeting. New stands and stables were built between 1975 and 1981. The course continues to flourish and is famous for the King George VI Steeplechase which is run on Boxing Day.

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Racing, together with other sports, had been taking place on the common meadow of Molesey Hurst from the 1730s. It is of interest to note that the first balloon ascent from Surrey was made there in 1785. In 1887 the Jockey Club closed the course as being unfit for racing. As an open racecourse it had produced little income but after the closure a group of investors bought the site and fenced it, intending that it should become a club for a variety of sports. Hurst Park racecourse opened in 1890 but in order to obtain a jockey Club licence the proprietors had to extend the course beyond the original Hurst grounds into East Molesey. Racing continued, with interruptions for both wars, until 1962 when the buildings were demolished and a housing estate was built on the site. The main grandstand was sold to Mansfield Town Football Club and the turf to Ascot.

Also in 1890 the racecourse at Lingfield Park was opened. This now has an 'all-weather' as well as a turf course, enabling racing to take place throughout the year.

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Hand-in-hand with a successful horse racing course there were always good rail facilities. Courses either had special stations built or had the local stations extended to cater for the race traffic. Epsom had two stations near the course, Epsom Downs and Tattenham Corner. The former station had nine platforms with sidings between the platform roads while the latter, built 36 years later in 1901, had six platforms as well as berthing sidings for 24 trains. Tattenham

Corner succeeded Epsom Downs as the terminal station for the royal train on Derby Day. Esher station had extra platforms with direct access to Sandown Park while Kempton Park station was built for use on race days only as it could only be used to gain access to or from the racecourse. The Hampton Court branch had additional berthing sidings to cater for race trains for Hunt Park and Lingfield station is close to Lingfield Park racecourse. Rail facilities have been drastically reduced in the age of the motor car and car parking space has been correspondingly increased.

Notes

1. Material relating to Eadweard Muybridge is held by Kingston upon Thames Museum. A new catalogue is in preparation in 1999.
2. Regal Cinema souvenir programme, 1933, in *Godalming 400* (Godalming 400 Committee, 1974, rep Godalming Trust).