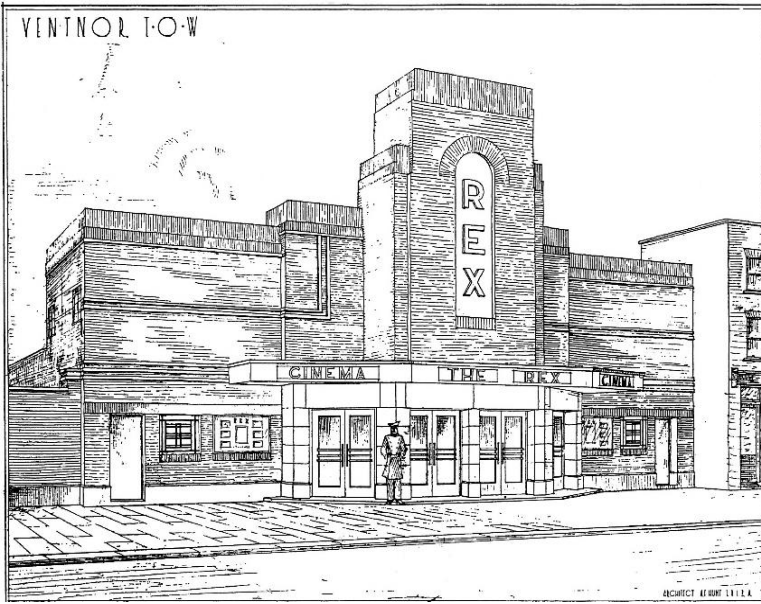


The Island's first 'super cinema'



In May 1938, a new cinema was opened in Ventnor at the junction of Church Street, Belgrave and Alpine Roads. It was built on land formerly occupied by John Gustar's furniture store, lately run by the Parkinson brothers, one of whom was, for a time, headmaster of Sandown Secondary Grammar School. The store and its site had been purchased in 1934, but work on the new cinema did not begin until 1937. The delay reflected in part the anxiety among townspeople that a large building on so prominent a site could be intrusive and fail to tone in with the local landscape.

The project's proprietors were Isle of Wight Theatres Ltd and a London architect, A.F. Hunt, was engaged to draw up the design, with James

Ball & Son of Cowes the builder. From the architect's impression above, the building had many of the characteristic hallmarks of Art Deco design: a highly geometric form to its frontage, a mock tower of the type seen on some new suburban railway stations in the 1930s, and a broad set of stainless steel entrance doors. However, what the line drawing does not really convey is that the cinema was built in red brick and behind the façade lay the massive auditorium that, when viewed from the Esplanade, looked like a giant aircraft hangar. Councillors and public were horrified when they saw the finished building. It looked hideous, failing completely to harmonise with its surroundings. They wanted the walls coloured. From the Esplanade, one council member likened it to a great barracks. It seems, though, that their complaints fell on deaf ears, perhaps compounded by the approach of war in 1939. Indeed, films and newsreels became something of a vital distraction during the war years and the 'super cinema' came into its own – an

escape from the privations and worries of wartime. The accompanying advert for July 5th 1940 shows what was then on the programme.

REX
VENTNOR TEL 400
(ISLE OF WIGHT THEATRES, LTD.) Matinees Wednesday and Saturday at 2.30
 Continuously from 6.0 p.m. Doors open 5.40 p.m.
 Approximate time of last complete performance 8.5 p.m.

To-night (Friday) and Saturday Monday, July 8, for 3 days Boris Karloff in The Man they Could not Hang <small>(H)</small> A Doctor turned demon – weird, horrifying, fascinating. Children under 16 not admitted to see this film.	Thursday, July 11, for 3 days Leslie Howard in Escape to Happiness <small>(A)</small> Drama of a famous man beckoned from home by a girl's golden beauty.
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The area around the eastward end of Belgrave Road, extending down Esplanade Road, suffered severe bomb damage at several stages of the war. However, the Rex suffered relatively minor impacts and had to be closed only for short periods. It was a very lucky escape, for the buildings immediately to its west had to be demolished in 1943. Unfortunately, this gave the large red brick auditorium even greater prominence when seen from down in the Bay. So it remained an eyesore in the eyes of many local people.

Michael Freeman, *Ventnor & District Local History Society*, from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre. This article first appeared in the *South Wight Chronicle* on 3 September 2020.

