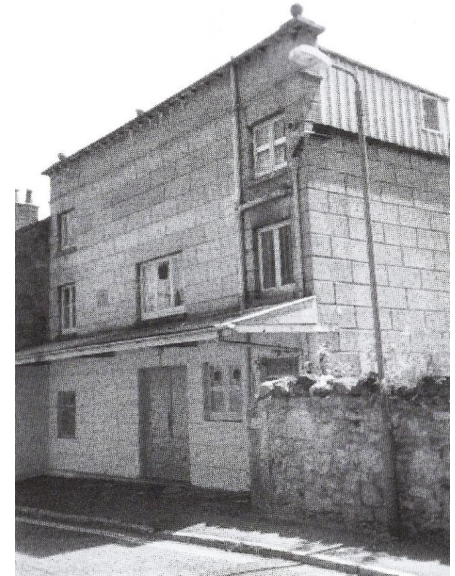


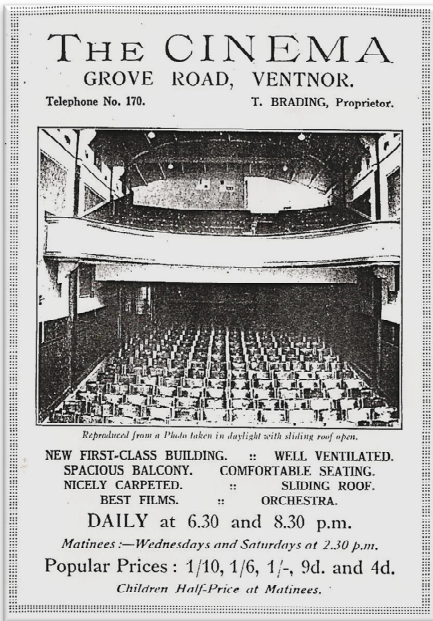
In 1911, a new 'moving picture house' called The Electric Palace was opened in Ventnor High Street. However, sometime between the end of the Great War and 1923, it was renamed The Bijou and continued showing silent movies until 1930. It remained popular, despite a brand new cinema opening in 1924 just around the corner, opposite the Crab & Lobster, in Grove Road. The new cinema was constructed by local builder Tom Brading and was named, appropriately, The Cinema. It was equipped with a sound system for showing the new craze of 'talking pictures'.

Despite the obvious appeal of the new attraction, The Cinema and The Bijou continued trading in parallel until 1930, when Tom Brading sold The Cinema to *Isle of Wight Theatres* (IWT) who already owned and operated the majority of cinemas in other towns on the Island. IWT immediately renamed the Cinema The Gaiety and it retained that name until it was finally closed.

It was famous for a particularly unique feature which was its 'air conditioning,' consisting of a sliding roof which was opened during the intervals to allow the accumulated cigarette smoke to escape! It was advertised as 'well ventilated' - but who knows how popular it would have been when it rained!



The auditorium, surprisingly, had seating for 320 customers, on two levels, as can be seen in the advertising poster on the left. The cheapest seats were in the Stalls and cost 4d and the dearest were in the Balcony and were 1/10d. Patrons in the 1/10's got a free cup of tea or an ice cream served by Mrs Drake, the wife of the chief projectionist, Basil Drake. Basil went on to become chief projectionist at the Rex on Church St. until his retirement.



When we took over Billy Flint's CTN shop in the High Street, at the end of 1975, we knew we were buying the goodwill but did not realise it included Mrs. Drake! It seemed that Billy Flint had an arrangement with Mrs Drake for her to deliver a handful of newspapers to a small area of Spring Hill (where she lived) in exchange for the shop collecting 'football coupons' for her, as she was an agent for Zetters, Littlewoods, Vernons, etc. People found it unusual, but she always turned up for her 'round' whatever the weather, and even if the papers were late, she would always keep coming back until they had arrived.

When IWT opened the new Rex cinema in Church Street in 1938, the Gaiety was relegated to summer-only opening, as there was not enough demand to sustain two cinemas out of season. However, during WW2, the Rex was bombed and the Gaiety re-opened full time until repairs to the Rex were completed.

After final closure, the Gaiety became a furniture store until 1980 when it was bought by the local Lodge of the Freemasons and converted into meeting and function rooms. The Ventnor & District Local History Society, among others, uses the auditorium for their monthly meetings and illustrated presentations. So, who would have thought that 100 years after it was first opened, the old Gaiety is still being used for sound and picture presentations!

Ventnor & District Local History Society: Colin Beavis - Photographs from society archives