



The Rex Cinema

In 1911, Ventnor's first cinema, 'the Bijou', was opened in the High Street, followed by the 'Gaiety' in Grove Road in 1924, and then the third and final cinema, 'the Rex', was completed and opened in 1938. This story is about the Rex, popular with the inhabitants of Ventnor, young and old alike, until its closure in 1980.

The Rex was owned by, and built for, Isle of Wight Theatres (IWT) and was situated in Church Street, opposite St. Catherine's Parish Church. It was unique among cinemas in that it was 'upside down'! It had been built over a cliff edge with the main auditorium downstairs, and the circle, (or balcony as we called it) at street level. The main (and only) entrance was from street level and the emergency doors at each side of the screen on the lower level (the stalls) opened out into an alleyway leading to Hambrough Road. I cannot hazard a guess as to how many people slipped in via these emergency doors over the years, after a 'friend' had 'accidentally' left them on the latch!



At the time of its opening, the head projectionist was Springhill resident, Basil Drake, previously the projectionist at the 'Gaiety' where his wife had served teas or ice creams to the patrons in the most expensive seats (priced at 1/10d). I was also told that Basil was a projectionist at the 'Bijou' where his wife played the piano for the silent movies. The very first films to be shown at the Rex, in the opening week in 1938, were Sonja Henie in *'Lovely to Look at'* and Will Hay in *'Oh Mr Porter'*. However, its triumphant beginning was short lived - in 1941 it was severely damaged by German bombs, and remained closed until repaired in 1946.

I have vivid memories of going to the Rex in the early 1950s, before the advent of TV, first of all as a child, enjoying the 'Saturday Morning Pictures' as they were known, with names like Buster Crabb, Gene Autry and Roy Rogers playing to packed rows of children in the stalls. If I remember correctly, they did not open the 'upstairs' on Saturday mornings! We continued to enjoy films at the Rex until its demise in 1980. The Rex, like most of the Island cinemas, remained under the ownership of IWT until October 1965 when the Leeds-based Star Cinemas chain took over. Incidentally, the cinema is briefly glimpsed in the 1973 film, *'That'll be the Day'*, starring, among others, David Essex & Ringo Starr. In the film, large queues outside the cinema could be seen snaking their way down Church Street, around the corner and some way down Hambrough Road! This had not been 'staged' for the film as, in the early days, it was not an unusual sight to see, especially when there was a 'blockbuster' showing.



The Rex Cinema was finally closed on 10th September 1980 with the very last film to be shown being *'Kramer vs Kramer'*, with Dustin Hoffman. It re-opened as an audio-visual tourist attraction, which lasted a couple of years. Then, after being converted into an amusement arcade and the 'Enchanted Caverns' exhibition, it was destroyed by a fire in March 1993. The amusement arcade in the front of the building, on street level, continued to operate until the remains of the roofless eyesore were demolished in 2001.

The photograph on the left shows the Kingsview complex - an apartment block and restaurant which was built on the site in 2004. As a fitting tribute to the iconic and unique building that stood here for 66 years, the restaurant was named 'the REX' and remains with that name today.

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