

The New Picture House 82-84 Westgate



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Wakefield Council and Historic England are investing nearly £4 million pounds in 2020-2024 to regenerate historic buildings in the Upper Westgate Conservation Area to bring new life and make it flourish again. As their contribution to the project, members of Wakefield Historical Society are researching the buildings and yards and publishing their stories

Front cover: children queue to watch a film matinee at the Picture House in Westgate in 1943. They were given free entry if they brought old rags, tyres or paper to help in the war effort. A Wakefield Express image on Twixt Aire and Calder x107020

The New Picture House

82-84 Westgate



Before the Picture House

Before this new picture house was built the people of Wakefield had to go to the Corn Exchange in Westgate to see films. The company which ran these was known as *'The Electric Theatre'* and they put on other entertainment as well. By 1910 their title had changed to *'The Grand Electric Theatre Ltd. Wakefield'*, and quite a transformation had taken place in the Assembly Room, better known as the Ballroom, at the Corn Exchange. A lease of the premises had been taken out by *'London and General Electric Theatres Ltd.'* whose Managing Director was Mr Philip Yorke. The decorations had been entrusted to Messrs C. Turner and Sons of Wood Street, Wakefield, and they were reported to have executed their work with credit. The walls were

French grey with a Rose Du Barry dado. The floor had been gradually raised to 4ft 6in at the far end which ensured every one attending obtained a good view of the stage.¹ The theatre opened on Thursday December 22nd 1910 according to an advertisement in the Wakefield Advertiser and Gazette two days earlier, and the entertainment was appealing with prices to suit all pockets.

By December 1911 'The Grand Electric Theatre's' resident manager, Mr George Wilson, included variety and novelty films, for instance showing films in which Frank Reilly the cowboy-cum-film star from a ranch in Montana U.S.A appeared. He was touring the world for a wager of £9,000. Sometimes Wilson showed films starring a Birkenhead family of juveniles in their amusing sketch '*Her Boy's Birthday*' mentioned on 7th December 1911 in 'The Music Hall and Theatre Review'.

A new picture house would have a lot of competition from other venues and types of entertainment. 'The Hippodrome', a variety theatre, was also open, and other picture houses were being opened. People would usually attend the one closest to them.

The New Picture House and Sydney Tolfree

In 1906 'The Hippodrome' attracted Mr Sydney Tolfree, well known in theatre circles, as its new manager. He was living at 5 Pinderfields Road Wakefield on the 1911 Census, the family being listed as follows:

- Sydney Tolfree, head, married, 30, Music Hall Proprietor, born Winsford Cheshire, Alfred Milner Tolfree son, 3, born Wakefield, Ann Peace, single, servant, 42, housekeeper born Sunderland, Durham.

Thirty years later Alfred, his son was back in Wakefield, when he became assistant cinema director for the Wakefield Picture Company in October 1936.

¹ Wakefield Advertiser and Gazette 20th December 1910

Tolfree soon developed a vision of a brand new picture house on Upper Westgate even though the Corn Exchange was thriving. This proposed 'New Picture House' was to show films only, according to the 'Wakefield and West Riding Herald' of 15th March 1913.

First of all, Tolfree had to acquire land and at this time some became available on the north side of Westgate. In the eighteenth century this land had belonged to the Burton family. They were involved in the wool trade, and their house which stood on this site, was fronted by the wool market with permanent scales to weigh the packs on market days. Since then new streets had been built off Westgate, lined with woolstaplers' warehouses and housing for their workers and on the Westgate frontage of the Burton plot were two shops. In the early twentieth century these were owned by J. E. Hinchliffe, who happened to be one of the directors of the newly-formed company, '*Wakefield Picture House Ltd*'.

Tolfree registered the company on April 16th with capital of £8000, in £1 shares. An agreement was made between J. E. Hinchliffe and Sidney Tolfree for the acquisition of the former's Westgate premises, 82-84 Westgate, which including Haworth's Yard. These were purchased and were to be demolished with the agreement of Mr Hinchliffe. This new company had not less than three and no more than seven directors, the first directors being A. Ratcliffe, H.A. Close, J.E. Hinchliffe, J.T.W. Waterhouse, S. Tolfree of Pinderfields Road, Wakefield (managing director, subject to holding 500 ordinary shares), W.E. Hartley, and R. White. The company was registered by solicitors Green and Williamson of 1 Barstow Square Wakefield.²

The construction job was put out to tender as shown in this advertisement which appeared on 2nd April 1913 in the 'Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer': '*Builders desirous of tendering for the pulling down of premises in Westgate, Wakefield, for the New Picture House, apply to Albert Winstanley, Architect, of St. Annes on Sea*'. On

² Kinematograph Weekly 24th April 1913

8th May 1913 another advert appeared in 'The Bioscope' stating that: *'Mr Albert Winstanley, Derby House, 5 Blackfriars Street, Manchester, is desirous of receiving tenders for the erection of a New Picture Hall at Westgate Wakefield'*.

Sydney was able to put his plans into action and on September 25th 1913 when as reported in the 'Kinematograph Weekly' of that date: *'The foundation stone of the picture house, Westgate, was laid by Mrs Sydney Tolfree, wife of councillor Tolfree, chairman of the directors of the Picture House. She was presented with a silver trowel and rosewood mallet in commemoration of the occasion'*. 'The New Picture House' plans received final approval on 23rd October 1913 as noted in the 'Kinematograph Weekly', and by the end of that year the building was done.

Ready for opening in late December 1913, *'the building, of a grand design with white upper and black lower was constructed on Upper Westgate, with 1460 seats, being the first proper new picture house for the Wakefield residents and surrounding areas'*.³ Another advertisement, appearing just after its opening on February 10th 1914 in the same paper, included the following description: *'the very imposing and colossal building in Westgate, Wakefield, was opened, as our readers are aware, on the 22nd December last by Mr Marshall the City's Member of Parliament. It is situated in the very centre of the town, and has already secured for itself a pre-eminent place in the local picture world'*.

It is interesting to note that from the commencement of the work to its final completion the time taken, according to the contract, was only six months. The work on the foundations gave rise to the gravest doubts as to whether the contractor would be able to succeed in his endeavour to fulfil the contract within the period agreed upon, as it was found that a tremendous amount of rock and shale clay had to be removed, prior to the real work of laying the foundations. The

³ Wakefield Advertiser and Gazette 23rd December 1913

contract was carried out by the noted firm of J. Parkinson & Sons of Blackpool, who had erected picture houses and theatres in various parts of the country.

The 'Wakefield Advertiser & Gazette' on Tuesday 10th February 1914 commented: *'From the very commencement to its completion, Mr Cryer (who has been with the firm for upward of ten years) has been in sole charge of the work and it is saying a great deal when we say that he has surprised not only the directors of the Picture Company, but the townspeople in general in completing the work within the specified time, owing to the enormous obstacles that were apparent during the initial stages, and the difficulty of obtaining men during the winter time to cope with the work of excavation which was got over in a remarkable way'.* With the help of local builder William Bagnall and hired horses and carts these problems were overcome. This advertisement appeared in the local press: *'Wanted 20 Horses and Carts to lead excavations from picture house Westgate apply Wm. Bagnall, Eastmoor, Wakefield or on the job, 8/6 per day'*.⁴

Later, the same paper wrote: *'A view of the building will convince anyone of the work connected with it, but it is a view of the interior that will astonish anyone who knows anything of the work of this kind that it was completed in a remarkably short time. The interior provides accommodation for 1480 people and the seating and general comfort of patrons far surpasses anything we have seen in the city before now. We understand that had there been no alteration in the original contract, the building would have been completed much earlier, there were some alterations, notably the extension of the stage. Moreover in order to expedite the work the men engaged worked during the night time by electric light'*.⁵

Other newspapers gave the 'New Picture House' a good write up, saying that the theatre had been built entirely with Wakefield money

⁴ Wakefield Advertiser and Gazette 1st July 1913

⁵ Wakefield Advertiser and Gazette 10th February 1914 page 4

and as far as possible local labour and materials had been used. It was described as the finest in the provinces and felt to be '*a great acquisition for the City of Wakefield*', with '*trusted promoters who would make it a success.*'

The 'Wakefield Advertiser and Gazette' of 23rd December 1913 described the new building, its visual impact, and the musical innovation and arrangements introduced in detail:

'We are able, by the courtesy of Mr Sydney Tolfree, managing director and Mr Albert Winstanley, the architect of Manchester (who has designed many successful theatres and picture houses in the provinces), to give a full description of the building. The site is an admirable one, being in the centre of the city and having a large frontage to Westgate. It is one of the most imposing structures in Wakefield. The main elevation has been carried out in English classical renaissance style, with large commanding central entrance, which can be seen from both bottom and top of Westgate. The front has been constructed in white marmot marble, and has been further improved by the erection of ornamental wrought iron and glass verandas, stretching out over the pavement, so as to allow intending patrons to enter the building in rainy weather without getting wet. Coloured glass has been used in all the windows, and the effect when the place is lighted up at night by numerous arc lamps, will be exceedingly effective. The main entrance, in the centre of the building, is fitted with settees, forming a kind of lounge waiting room, finished with a white and gold and panelled ceiling. On the right hand side is the box office for stalls, circle, and boxes de luxe. Opposite is the large grand main staircase leading to the grand foyer, and the tea lounge. At the top is the ladies' and gentlemen's cloak room and refreshment room, and the manager's private and general offices. The grand circle and boxes de luxe are all entered from the foyer, and contain eight boxes de luxe, four lounge settees, and seating accommodation for 350. The circle will have tip up seating throughout. On the ground floor are the stalls, entered from the foyer, with seating accommodation for 216.

Throughout the building there are duplicate exits for every part of the house, so that the building can be cleared in a short space of three minutes. In every part of the house fire extinguishers of the latest pattern are provided, so that it is only necessary to turn on the hose to obtain a supply of water. The Picture House will thus be one of the safest theatres in the kingdom. The bio-scope box is placed at the back of the stalls, and is built in fireproof concrete throughout, having an intermediate safety chamber. The theatre is warmed by pipes and radiators in suitable positions, and the ventilation is of first-class character. The auditorium has been carried out throughout in cream and gold. The ceiling is richly panelled in circular style with a large dome in the centre, which is not only artistic, but can be used for the ventilation of the building. The safety, comfort, and well-being of the public have been the main features of the building. The design of the decoration is mainly of the Georgian Renaissance style, and the decorations, modernised Louis XIV, produced a richness unspoilt by elaboration. The proscenium sides are richly modelled in fibrous plaster mortar, with large centre medallions. The whole of the interior decoration is in cream and gold. The total seating capacity is 1460 with standing room.'

During the opening week Mr Tolfree has succeeded in booking one of the greatest master pieces ever produced, namely 'The Last Days of Pompeii' taken from Lord Lytton's novel, and showing in detail the destruction of the great Italian city by the volcanic eruptions of Vesuvius. The special feature is of course the latest invention, the Cinechordeon, which is the only instrument of its kind in the North of England. There will be matinees on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturdays, and two performances on Christmas Day.....An excellent orchestra had been under the baton of Mr Haydon Parker and the acting manager is Mr C.H. Locke. Two performances are to be given nightly and the prices of admission range from 2d to boxes at 6 shillings'.

An early showing of the film 'Sixty years a Queen, Victoria' in 1914 was of great interest. It attracted full houses and was so popular that Sydney Tolfree decided to re-book it again for the following year, 1915.

But all did not go to plan. When the film arrived and was played it was defective, so Tolfree refused to pay the rental fee of £25. The film had been rented from James Thomas Sutcliffe of Accrington who took out a counter-claim of £30. In January 1915 the case came before Judge Greenhow at Wakefield with 'The Picture House Company' claiming that 1500 feet of film had to be cut out and most of the important incidents had to be removed and so the audience was disappointed, and the film was a failure, and the takings compared with the first showing were very poor. The Judge found that the film was not in a reasonable condition and gave judgement for the defendant, with costs of the action. Sutcliffe withdrew the counter-claim.⁶

From Picture House to Playhouse

Mr Tolfree, the late acting manager of the Hippodrome, decided to shut down the Hippodrome, and put it up for sale as a result of the council's refusal of a licence on safety issues, and by August Bank Holiday 1914 he also decided to change the name of 'The Picture House' to 'The Playhouse'.⁷ The films were silent with musical accompaniment, and also variety acts and concerts for serving soldiers were introduced.⁸ They continued throughout the Great War.

The Advertiser and Gazette announced a special show: *'Wakefield Amusements, a Capital Show, at the Playhouse, 24th October 1916'*. Events were organised to raise money for the war effort and they also put on pantomimes not only at Christmas: such as that advertised by 'The Advertiser and Gazette' on 20th February 1917.

By the end of the war in 1918 a lot of picture houses were being snapped up by cinema companies. 'The Playhouse' at Westgate needed a new image. They also needed a new conductor and a pianist

⁶ Kinematograph Weekly 7th January 1915

⁷ Kinematograph Weekly 16th July 1914 Page 93.

⁸ Wakefield Advertiser and Gazette 16th November 1915



INTERIOR OF

THE PLAYHOUSE

WESTGATE WAKEFIELD

THE MOST LUXURIOUSLY
APPOINTED CINEMA IN
THE DISTRICT

FITTED WITH THE LATEST IN
PROJECTION AND SOUND
REPRODUCTION EQUIPMENT

THE RENDEZVOUS FOR WAKEFIELD
PEOPLE WHO DESIRE THE BEST
IN ENTERTAINMENT

or organist, advertising for these on 5th December 1918 in the 'Kinematograph Weekly'. They had to increase the size of the orchestra and put on plays and variety whilst still showing pictures on three days a week. This managed to tide 'The Playhouse' over. In 1919, The 'Trinity Picture House' was still going strong at Belle Vue. It

had opened at the outbreak of the war and residents at that end of Wakefield preferred to go there rather than make the journey to Westgate, unless the film in town was of particular personal interest.⁹

Sydney left Wakefield in 1921. A new super cinema had been built in Scarborough in 1921 and he became director of the Futurist Cinema there.

Claud Shayler

New management came to 'The Playhouse'. Mr Claud Shayler and Mr George Brown brought new ideas. They set about finding new artistes, actors and vocalists to appear whilst the pictures also continued, so increasing their revenue. 'The Wakefield Picture House Company' continued to run 'The Playhouse', and soon alterations were made that reduced the seating to 1,000 but increased the size of the orchestra pit. By June 1920 'The Playhouse' was doing so well they presented patrons with a souvenir booklet.¹⁰ At Eastertide the first and second houses were full, so they had to open the first house half an hour early as queues were gathering 100 yards either side of the entrance, and Wakefield Council objected to queues on the pavement. It became so popular that booking seats was essential, and generally both first and second houses were full with continuous showings.¹¹ In August 1921 the Playhouse got its new organ and orchestra.¹² On December 1st 1921 at 'The Wakefield Playhouse Cinema' the heating system was improved and overhauled making it cosier,¹³ and in 1922 they got a new projector operator with a new Gaumont machine.¹⁴ On 11th July 1922 'The Playhouse' lost its long-

⁹ Wakefield Advertiser and Gazette 3rd November 1914

¹⁰ 'Kinematograph Weekly' 10th June 1920

¹¹ 'Kinematograph Weekly' 15th April 1920

¹² Kinematograph Weekly 5th August 1921

¹³ Kinematograph Weekly 1st December 1921

¹⁴ Kinematograph Weekly 9th March 1922

standing doorman, popularly known as 'Big Mick'. Initially he had been employed by Sydney Tolfree, and had worked under him at 'The Hippodrome'. His funeral was well attended and Claud Shayler represented 'The Playhouse'. Floral tributes, too, were sent by the Directors of 'The Wakefield Picture House Company'.¹⁵

By 1923 'The Playhouse Super Cinema' as it was sometimes called, had its grand new organ, and Claud Shayler introduced a handbook called 'Film Chats', containing the month's attractions and film favourites, and also details of the film stars.¹⁶ It had a mailing list of 1,000. He arranged for 'The Playhouse' to be open on Sunday evenings to get young people off the streets, involving gospel talk and music, and he also put on concerts and raised £30 for a local poor children's fund.¹⁷ In April 1923 a film was shown at 'The Playhouse Super Cinema' called '*Mord Em'ly*' and a leading bookseller stocked a window with the novel of the same name as a tribute to the film and did good business from it.¹⁸ Claud Shayler arranged for all six Wakefield Cinemas to be open in aid of Clayton Hospital Fund, on Armistice Day 15th November 1923 according to 'Kinematograph Weekly'. In October 1924, *'through the kind offices of Sydney Tolfree (managing director) and Claud Shayler (general manager), of 'The Playhouse Super Cinema' Wakefield, the old folk of the city had a free showing of the Pathe film 'Wembley' last week'*.¹⁹

Just afterwards, on 16th October 1924, shortly after the beginning of the first house, the cinema had a fire in which an operator and assistant were burned. A comedy film caught fire and caused such damage to the fireproof operating box that the show had to be abandoned for the night. When the reflection of the fire was seen on the screen, there was some commotion amongst the audience, but the prompt reassurance of the manager, Claud Shayler, succeeded in

¹⁵ Wakefield Advertiser and Gazette 11th July 1922

¹⁶ Kinematograph Weekly 23rd August 1923

¹⁷ Kinematograph Weekly 16th April 1925

¹⁸ Kinematograph Weekly 19th April 1923

¹⁹ Kinematograph Weekly 16th October 1924

restoring order. The regular operator was away ill, but an experienced operator was in charge, and in endeavouring to put out the flames he and his assistant received burns to their faces, necks and arms and had to be treated at the local infirmary. The damage was confined to the operating room, it being fireproof. Next morning necessary repairs were effected.²⁰

In 1925 one of the best films shown was '*The Zeebrugge*', and Claud Shayler accordingly had the facade and interior of the building decorated with flags, bunting and patriotic symbols with additional billing matter in red, white and blue covering the hoardings. On the stage, actor George Benson appeared and gave a fine naval prologue in costume. The orchestra was led by Albert Collinson, and national and patriotic music was played by Fred Gawthorpe on the grand organ. A special feature was made of the St. George's Day performance under the patronage of the 4th Battalion K.O.Y.L.I. and three special shows run for children.²¹ Claud Shayler had some great ideas, for example during the hot summer weather he had a notice outside the theatre saying '*an icehouse may be cooler but 'The Playhouse' is more comfortable*'²²

A new musical director, Mr Arthur Smith, was then appointed, he was very experienced in cinema as a musical director, and had once had the same role on the '*S.S. Lusitania*' and other transatlantic liners. He was supported at the cinema by a completely new orchestra of capable players.²³ Claud Shayler introduced '*Football Favourites*' and this was a success and he continued to put on films and events for good causes. One raised £40 for a local sports club. In 1926 there was a miners' strike causing fuel shortages. 'The Playhouse' took its power from the corporation and by June it was looking bleak, but they just about managed to continue.

²⁰ Kinematograph Weekly 16th October 1924

²¹ Kinematograph Weekly 30th April 1925

²² Kinematograph Weekly 6th August 1925

²³ Kinematograph Weekly 18th August 1927

In 1927 the Watch Committee passed plans submitted by Chadwick Watson and Co., architects of Leeds, on behalf of Mr W. C. Shayler, for alterations to the seating arrangements at 'The Playhouse' Westgate, Wakefield. This extra seating brought the total capacity to 1200. Also the attendants dressed in new uniforms and other renovations were completed. On the 18th August 1927 Shayler arranged to show a film '*The Gymkhana*', which he had commissioned. It covered a Wakefield charity event which included a carnival parade through the city for horse-drawn and motor vehicles. Promoted by 'The Wakefield and District Motor Cycle and Light Car Club' it included motor cycle football matches as well as the gymkhana at Clarence Park.²⁴ On 22nd November 1928 in aid of the Wakefield branch of 'The British Legion' a vocal and cinema entertainment was held on Armistice Day evening at 'The Playhouse Super Cinema' and raised £35.

'Talkies'

By 1929 'talkies' came to Wakefield. Claud Shayler continued to improve 'The Playhouse' and by July 8th 1929 he had introduced his Western Electric style films to the Playhouse, the first being '*The Singing Fool*' then '*On Trial*' and '*In Old Arizona*' with an assortment of short talking pictures. When the 'talkies' appeared, it heralded the demise of the orchestra which caused a stir in the city, but the 'talkies' soon took off and the Playhouse had to put on three performances daily and four on Saturdays. At that time no films were allowed on Sundays.

Then in 1932 'Kinematograph Weekly' announced: '*The Playhouse' Wakefield, which has been open since December 1913, is to be rebuilt. Jack Tideswell director and controller of bookings for Wakefield Picture Theatres Ltd, informs us that the seating capacity will be increased from 1200 to over 2000*'. This did not happen until

²⁴ The Bioscope, 25th August, 1927

December 1934. In 1933 'The Playhouse' was showing matinees daily, such as Ruth Chatterton in 'Lily Turner' and 'Viennese Waltz' the story of Johann Strauss, and in 1934, Wakefield Playhouse entertained school children. Wireless apparatus was installed and 1200 children were invited to hear a broadcast of the Royal Wedding arranged by Mr Claude Shayler. An application by 'The Playhouse' to gain permission to hold a cinema performance on Sunday, November 11th, on behalf of the British Legion, prompted the Corporation to get the views of the licensees of other cinemas about being allowed to open on Sundays and on which dates. The application by 'The Playhouse' was granted to try the idea out.

In December 1934 'The Kinematograph Weekly' noted that *'The Playhouse' Wakefield which has been closed this week for the completion of the costly renovation scheme, is reopening on Saturday, exactly 21 years after its original opening. C. Shayler, the manager states that almost the only things of the old building remaining are the four walls'.*

Things went well until 1935 but a problem with housing in Westgate was developing, concerning most of the properties on the north side. An inspection was carried out by the council inspector and he condemned some houses as not fit for human habitation. Although a lot of the tenants asked for the properties to be renovated, the council had plans to demolish them. During the enquiry relating to the resulting clearance order, reference was made to future extensions of the Playhouse cinema. Among the properties proposed to be demolished were three houses in Westgate belonging to the directors of 'The Playhouse'. T. V. Way, who appeared for 'The Playhouse', said the directors' object in buying the properties was to have land for extensions to 'The Playhouse', if and when such extensions should take place. He assured the enquiry that it would take place within the space of two or three years and added that the directors would give an undertaking to spend money on the houses on certain repairs for this period. They agreed not to use the premises for human habitation if they were found to be unfit for that

purpose and incapable of remedy. William Watson, an architect and surveyor and a director of the cinema, described how alleged defects could be made good. In the end the site was only partly developed and it was agreed that 'The Playhouse' houses were not to be demolished provided the repairs were completed. However clearance had gone on in the area and this seems to have provided parking for the cinema. From 1937 advertisements for films included the 'Free Parking for Playhouse Patrons' as here from the Leeds Mercury on the 11th December 1937.



The Wakefield Education Committee allowed 'David Copperfield' to be shown to 3,000 school children at the Playhouse, which took five matinees to complete. In this way the Playhouse continued through to World War II, with Mr Claud Shayler as manager showing talking pictures and booking musical entertainments, but in 1937 Mr Shayler became ill and Sydney Tolfree's son, Alfred Milner Tolfree, took over his duties.

After Claud Shayler

Alfred Milner Tolfree promoted the film 'Everything is Rhythm' in the town's principal music shop where he had attractively decorated a window full of dance band instruments, including drums, bearing the words exactly as used by musician Joe Daniels in 'Everything is Rhythm'. There were also stills from the film, all dealing with the band at work, and there were copies of film star and bandleader Harry Roy's magazine with invitation forms for the public to become members of the Wakefield branch of the Harry Roy Club.

Alfred carried on the tradition of events, for example he organised the annual old folks treat for 700 older citizens and reserved the whole bottom floor for them. Sadly on 21st December 1939 'The Kinematograph Weekly' reported that 'The Playhouse' had lost one of its great managers: *'the death has occurred at his home in Mount Crescent, Thornes Road, Wakefield, of Mr Claud Shayler, a well known figure in Yorkshire cinema and theatrical circles. Mr Shayler, who was 63, was manager of 'The Playhouse' cinema Wakefield for 17 years. Mr Shayler arranged a number of concerts from time to time in Wakefield for local charities and other events. He leaves a widow, son and daughter'*.

In February 1941 the Corporation voted in favour of applying for the Sunday opening of cinemas, having been twice discussed since 1934. The Watch Committee agreed to continue Sunday opening but imposed certain conditions: originally that 10% of the proceeds go to charity. The cinemas objected to this arguing that their books would be inspected, and their contents should not be of public concern. Instead they suggested an annual contribution of £520 and finally a sum of £600 was agreed upon, 5% of which would go to the C.T.B.F. charity. Sunday opening would commence the following Sunday and Wakefield evening closing hours extended from 9.30pm to 10.30pm for the summer period.



In 1943 when the war effort was going on, the Playhouse cinema allowed free entry to children if they brought clothing, old tyres, and paper with them. Behind this scheme was Alfred Milner Tolfree, and it was called a salvage scheme. It went better than expected and raised vast amounts of money for the war effort, and as a thank you the Playhouse put on special matinees for the children. Then, not long after the war had finished, in 1946, 'The Playhouse' cinema had a lucky escape: it would may have been burned down but for quick work by the Wakefield National Fire Service. The fire brigade arrived on the scene within 3 minutes of the alarm being given and prevented further damage being done. The fire originated in a pile of straw and rubbish in a disused shop adjoining the cinema.

After the war, in 1948 'The Playhouse' continued to put on concerts, as well as showing pictures. Their symphony orchestra concerts in aid of the Mayor's Charity Fund were often sold out. But by 1951 attendance at the cinema was declining, and to make matters worse the owner, Mr Henry Alwyn Close, who had been a former chairman

of the company and also owned 'The Grand Electric Cinema' Westgate, died after being knocked down by a motor cyclist. He was also well known as an amateur for Wakefield Trinity Football Club. Even so 'The Playhouse' cinema continued until 1956 when it was bought by the 'Essoldo Circuit Holding Company'. The deal included the transfer of the property of 'The Wakefield Corn Exchange Co. Ltd.', owners of a large block of buildings in Westgate which housed 'The Grand Electric Cinema', so two Wakefield cinemas were involved in this one big property deal. This made the possibility of live theatre again at 'The Opera House' viable, itself at that moment an Essoldo Classic Cinema. The company had been disappointed with the performance of it as a cinema but would not increase the seating capacity above 450, so they decided they could open it as a theatre again, which would make 'The Playhouse' their principal cinema. The shareholders of both cinema companies were Councillor Watson, Mr & Mrs A. M. Tolfree and Mr & Mrs E. Smith.

On June 21st 1956 'Kinematograph Weekly' reported that: *'Miss Hannah Wood, who is believed to be the longest-serving cinema employee in this country, has retired at the age of 68 after being employed at 'The Playhouse' Wakefield for more than 42 years, 36 of them being in the pay box. She became chief cashier in 1922, a position she has held until quite recently. During the 1914-1918 war the cinema also featured live shows, and Miss Wood well remembers Gracie Fields in 'Mr Tower of London', which was previewed at Wakefield before going to London'.*

The modern era

By the late 1960s Wakefield had many cinemas and eventually 'The Playhouse' was taken over by Ladbroke's, who already operated bingo sessions in 'The Classic Cinema'. They changed it into a popular business at the time, a Bingo Hall. Later it became a skate centre for a



The Picture House with overhanging cover when it was a skate centre and before the night club scene emerged in Westgate

period, whilst also showing films. Then the Council approved the building's use for different entertainment businesses, and 'Roof Tops' nightclub took over the top of the building with 'Casanova's' below. This required great changes and by plans submitted in 1982 'Casanova's' altered the floor and ceiling, installed a cabaret bar, and a main entrance to the front of the building, with an additional ramp down the side as a quick emergency exit. They also had a licence for music, singing and a supper hour granted. In 1984 more alterations were made with an extension at the rear, planning being passed on June 1st. At the same time the late hours were extended from 11.30pm to 1am, and with the extra room the club could also accommodate more people. In the new millennium, after great renovations, the premises became the 'Quest' club and also later 'Mustang Sally's' pub and then 'Nocturno's' and 'Kooky' nightclubs.

Even today the words 'Picture House' have been retained on the

building as a reminder of what it used to be, and long may it continue to be preserved.

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WYAS History Centre, Wakefield, Playhouse cinema, WYHER/12967.

Photos

Salvage Scheme © Wakefield Express Newspaper Group Ltd

Picture House interior from 'The Playhouse' souvenir booklet, 1920, Wakefield Local Studies Library.

Skate Centre era from 'Wakefield - now and then' on Facebook.

Contemporary photos ©Derick Smith

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WAKEFIELD
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

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