



# The Buckingham Society

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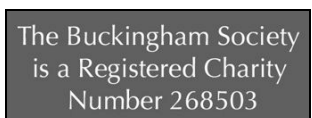
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## *Highlights:*

Trees of Buckingham • Access Rights and Footpaths

A Century of Buckingham Cinema • Planning Updates



# A Century of Cinema in Buckingham

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 **Ed Grimsdale & assisted by Denis Tunk**

## ***The Fair Bioscope***

Cinema first came to Buckingham with the annual Charter Fairs. Fair people were amongst the first to recognise the potential of the Lumiere brothers' "Cinématographe" invention of 1895. Annual fairs thrived on change and freshness. It was in Edwardian days that a "bioscope" was first installed outside the Town Hall by showman Alf Ball from Hull. "Professor Alf Ball", as he called himself, presented "The Great American Bioscope Animated Pictures".

No renting of films in those days, so it helped that the "Show" rolled on from one market town to the next. The whole show would have been a glittering affair with a huge Burrell fair engine 'Alfred the Great' generating the electricity, a Gavioli organ to provide music and dancing girls to pad out the costly images. Word about the "flicks" spread seemingly at the speed of light across town and crowds packed the bioscope shows to experience the new sensation. The experience was intoxicating and the wait for the next autumn for the return of the Fairs and their novelty seemed a long time.

The people demanded their own "Cinema" and then, as now, Buckingham Town Council was keen to show its support. Buckingham was lucky that Mr Chapman ran its photography shop (the business still exists under the management of the Herring family). Mr

Chapman was a cutting-edge entrepreneur willing to invest in new technology:

## ***The "Talking" Electric Cinema***

This "camped" in the large room upstairs in the Town Hall. When Mr. R.H Chapman opened it in the middle of the First World War, 340 seats were crammed in, but later that number was reduced to a more comfortable 250. I have met a lady who lives in Mitre Street who remembers as a young girl buying a 3d ticket and the subsequent rush of eager youngsters as the doors opened for the early show on Saturday evenings. As was the custom in those early "silent" days, the screen action was given extra intensity by a resident pianist – Mrs Webb who lived in Chandos Road. During the interval the hot air in the packed hall would be freshened with a scented spray.

Health and Safety became an issue in cinemas across the world during the 1920's after a series of projection room fires caused by accidents with the exceptionally flammable nitrocellulose that was used for film stock. Nitrocellulose in another form was called guncotton! Readers will remember one such incident in Giuseppe Tornatore's Italian tearjerker *Cinema Paradiso* (1988). So, the town surveyor's room was turned into an asbestos-lined projection room in 1930 and the town became the third in Britain outside

London to show "talking pictures". Have a look at the "Advertiser" preview for "Simply Scarlet" from the summer 1931. In the same season, Buckingham people saw their first musical comedy "Sunny Side", an Anglo-American confection.

With Buckingham beginning to recover from the Great Depression, it was time to build the town's first (and last?) purpose-built picture house. Amongst the financial midwives was Buckingham Town Council that bought 128 of Mr Chapman's "Electric" chairs for £128..16s..0d.

### **The Chandos Cinema**

Satchwell Roberts designed this unusual cinema at the junction of Chandos and London roads equipping it with a wedge-shaped foyer and stained glass windows!

Interestingly, the site had once housed the town's stone barn theatre, the remnants of which may well be seen in the ashlar-faced round "corner-house" at the head of Bridge Street which houses H& M Shoe Repairs. The plans for the purpose-built cinema were put to the Town Council in 1933 which referred them to the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE). CPRE declared that the roof should be tiled in apple green, a tone chosen to blend rural cinemas with their environment. Whatever the recommendations, the tiles on today's Vauxhall Garage

are bog-standard red. The builder was Mr C.T. Cecil who operated from a yard in Stratford Road in the North East End of Buckingham.

The house next to the Cinema on London Road was built at the same time for its owner. Lord Addington attended the opening ceremony that was undertaken by Lady Bowyer. The proprietor, Mr Parker, became a well-known Buckingham personality and he joined the Council.

The original design specified a capacity of 450 people. Inside the décor was cheerful rather than stylist with pink and purple as the predominant tones. There were two shows on Mondays, Thursdays (traditionally half-day closing for Buckingham businesses) and on Saturdays when there was an extra

**The CHANDOS CINEMA**  
BUCKINGHAM Ltd

Tel. Buckingham 3196.

**Monday, March 27th** **Six Days**

SARAH MILES, STUART WHITMAN  
IN  
**Those Magnificent Men in  
their Flying Machines**  
(U) **NEWS**

**TIMES OF SHOWING:**  
Mon., Tues., Wed., Thurs., Fri. 7.30 p.m. Sat. 5.30 & 8 p.m.

**TO-NIGHT—Hey There, I'ts Yogi Bear (u)**

**PRICES OF ADMISSION :** **BOOKINGS BY PHONE.**  
EVENING: Stalls 2/; and 2/9. Balcony 3/3.  
Children (accompanied by parent): Stalls 1/9. Balcony 2/6.  
Advance Booking: Balcony 3/6; Stalls 3/-.  
No reduced prices for children Saturday evening.  
Children will not be permitted to "A" films unless accompanied by parent or guardian. Children under 16 not admitted to "X" films.

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matinee programme for children at 2.30pm. Later, the seating condensed to 380 including 68 in a pricier, shallow balcony.

The Chandos Cinema played a role in maintaining morale during World War II. Keith Frank Chapman of Lillingstone Dayrell remembers:

*“We would cycle to the Chandos cinema at Buckingham and leave our bikes propped up by the wall outside. The seats cost a shilling. If it had been raining the cinema would fill up with steam as the people’s clothes began to warm up.”*

When the Latin School moved to its present site in 1963, Brookfield House and Rotherfield House were converted into boarding houses. During the 1970’s around 80 girls and boys lived at the school and the Saturday evening exeat to visit the Chandos was much prized – and, of course, the threat of its withdrawal was a spur to good behaviour.

*Chandos Cinema is now the local Vauxhall dealer.*



The Harris family, and notably Mrs Gwen Harris, were important in sustaining Buckingham’s Chandos Cinema. They became its proprietors and loved it so much that they lived next door on London Road. Eventually, Gwen Harris was forced to sell the cinema, but she remained its emergency holiday relief projectionist. One member of the Harris family remains in Buckingham: Claire and she’s married to ex-Mayor Cllr Robin Stuchbury, so it is no surprise that he and the Town Councillors helped to deliver:

### **The Film Place**

The Film Place is Buckingham's new cinema using the 180 seater Fairbairn lecture theatre in the University of Buckingham’s Chandos Road complex. Community spirit, spear-headed by the Community Plan, has acquired a four metre wide quality screen and a fine surround-sound audio system. The Manager of The Film Place, which opened in 2005, is Mark Gadd. In September 2005, David McGahey, Chairman of the Buckingham Centre for the Arts, accepted an award on behalf of the The Film Place, a joint venture with the University of Buckingham. The Buckingham cinema project won the award for the best Community project in the South East and was presented by Action for Market Towns at the Friends Meeting House in London. Upon accepting the award, David McGahey said “It was a pleasure to be able to accept this award on behalf of The Film Place. This award offers us great encouragement for the future.” Dr Terence Kealey, our University’s Vice Chancellor, added “This is wonderful news and great recognition”.