

# CINEMAS HEADINGLEY



## HEADINGLEY PICTURE HOUSE/ COTTAGE ROAD CINEMA 1912 to Present Day

### The opening

Cottage Road Cinema opened its doors as the **Headingley Picture House** on Monday **29 July 1912**, advertising continuous performances from 6 to 10.30 pm every evening except Sunday, a matinee on Wednesdays, and two children's matinees on Saturday. Seats cost 6 pence (2.5p) and reserved seats one shilling (5p) – a night out within most people's budget.

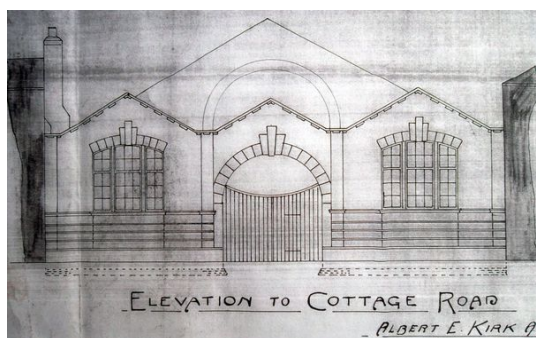
Cinemas were opening everywhere. In 1911 there had been 8 'electric theatres' in Leeds; two years later there were 31. The Headingley Picture House was the first in this busy, expanding suburb, with plenty of customers for this wonderful new form of entertainment on their doorstep. It soon had competition – the Hyde Park Picture House opened in 1914, followed two years later by the Lounge, purpose-built in North Lane. They all prospered: going to 'the pictures' was all the rage.



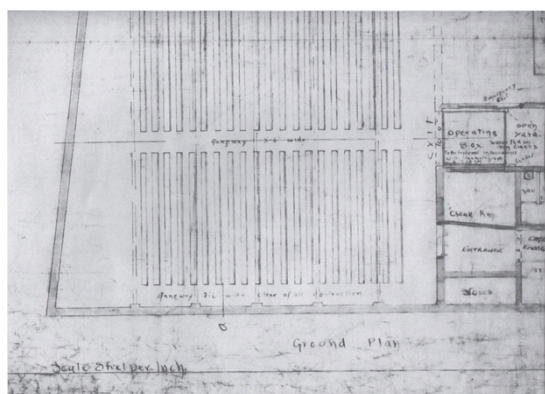
## The building

The picture house was converted from a private motor garage built in 1908 for one of the sons of the wealthy Kirk family, who lived in the Castle Grove mansion in Moor Road, at the top of Cottage Road. John Kirk, head of a firm of dyers at Woodhouse Carr, had bought the mansion in 1894 and spent a fortune extending and refurbishing it. His four sons were keen early motorists who liked to 'race' their prototype cars up and down Cottage Road at 20 mph, upsetting the local residents! They will have needed somewhere to keep their expensive cars, preferably away from the house as these early motors were noisy and smelly and frightened the horses.

In 1897 one of the Kirk sons, Herbert Reginald Kirk, had bought a plot of land in Cottage Road from a local farmer and dairyman, William Smith, who had a yard with stables and a cow-house there. There is evidence to suggest that Herbert Kirk may have intended initially to develop the land commercially, but in December 1907 he got approval for a plan to build a large architect-designed garage and workshop on the site for the family's cars. A chauffeur was housed next door. However, John Kirk died in 1908 and in the following few years all the brothers left Leeds, though Castle Grove itself was not sold until 1920. Meanwhile the garage building was no longer needed, and in 1912 it was taken over by two men with an exciting new project in mind.



Plan of façade of garage, 1907



Part of ground plan of conversion to cinema, 1912

## The founders

The men behind the initiative for the cinema in Cottage Road were (Willie) **Owen Brooks** and his partner, **George Reginald Smith**. Smith was a young motor engineer in his twenties, with family links to the owners of the Wharton Hotel in Park Lane, Leeds. He certainly knew Herbert Kirk and was pictured around 1910 riding with him in his new Mercedes car. Brooks was in his forties, working as a studio photographer in his former grocer's shop in Dewsbury Road. He was an early cinema enthusiast and pioneer, in contact with Louis Le Prince who had his workshop in Woodhouse Lane in the 1880s. Brooks is said to have developed his own cine-camera and around 1900 had made his first film of Boar Lane from the top of a horse tram – a piece of early Leeds cinema history. In the early 1900s he worked with a local engineer called Frederick Borland and the music-hall entrepreneur Thomas Barrasford to develop projection equipment called the 'Barrascope', used to show short films and newsreels as part of the twice-nightly variety programme at Barrasford's Tivoli Theatre in Leeds.



Owen Brooks

Brooks was a flamboyant figure. He built himself one of the first motorcycles, red with a long wicker sidecar, and terrified the residents of Beeston by speeding up and down with anyone brave enough to ride along. When vehicle registration began in 1903 he managed to get the coveted plate U1 in the motorbike series. He and Smith as motoring enthusiasts like the Kirk brothers will have known about their garage/workshop in Cottage Road. In

1912 they saw the opportunity to take over the building and move into the thrilling new world of film and popular entertainment.

### Early years

Plans to convert the garage into a 'picture hall' were approved in March 1912, and in April the Leeds Watch Committee granted Brooks and Smith a license for cinematography and music, after an inspection visit. (Local neighbours worried about the potential noise and nuisance.) Over the following few years various improvements to the building were carried out, always under the strict eye of the Watch Committee.

The films shown during the early years were of course all silent, but a pianist was employed to play along, improvising sentimental melodies for the romantic scenes and thumping 'hurry' music for excitements like the Keystone Cops chases. Timing was important for the pianist and the projectionist – slow readers had to have time to read the subtitles. By the 1920s the Headingley Picture House had its own orchestra with pianist, cellist, and violinist (Signor Chiodini – his real name!), while for the children's matinees the cinema cashier Mrs Gertrude Lyons would rush round from the box office to play the piano – all for a salary of £1 a week.



Programmes, February 1916

During the First World War, the picture house played a new and important part in keeping people up to date by showing newsflashes of the War, and in March 1915, in an effort to boost morale, the Watch Committee allowed an 'elocutionist' to be employed for 3 days to recite alongside a patriotic film. In the dark days of 1916, permission was given for a vocalist to sing during the performance of the film *Abide with Me*. (An exception, as singing in cinemas was strongly opposed by local music halls and theatres on grounds of unfair competition.)

Sunday performances, normally banned, were also occasionally allowed for patriotic or religious events, during and after the War – in March 1921, for example, Headingley Picture House was opened for 'Warriors' Cinema Sunday', part of a series of events across the country in remembrance of those who had died in the Great War. (The general ban on Sunday performances remained in force until 1946, but Headingley did not open on Sundays until some years later.)

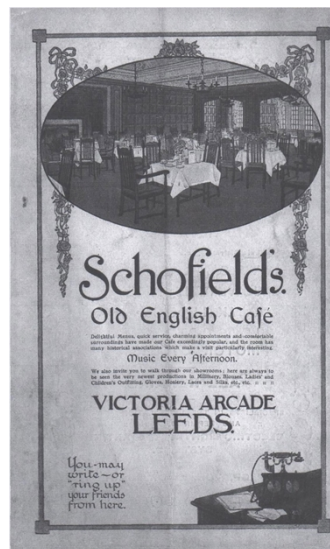
When memories of the cinema were collected in the 1970s, many remembered the children's matinees of the 20s – films with Fatty Arbuckle, Douglas Fairbanks Senior, and Pearl White in the serial *The Perils of Pauline*, keeping everyone hanging on for the next

episode. The children brought in oranges to eat and the smell pervaded the cinema. The doorkeeper James Willaton used to warn the children to clean their muddy boots before treading on the fine new carpet!

### Under new management

In May 1922, after the early death of his partner George Smith, Owen Brooks and Smith's widow Ella Smith bought the cinema building from Herbert Kirk for £4,500. A new company, **The Headingley Picture House Ltd.**, was named as sub-purchaser. Brooks was a Director of the company, together with a new partner, a wealthy local builder called **Alfred William Atkinson**. Alfred Atkinson was a keen amateur photographer, so had shared interests with Brooks, and no doubt had money to invest. However, only two years later Brooks dropped out – for unknown reasons – and the company was then run by Alfred Atkinson with his brother Henry George as the other director. Owen Brooks' cinematograph license passed briefly to **Claude Horatio Whincup**, a young man already active in the cinema world as a film distributor. He later became manager of Associated Tower Cinemas, which was to enter the Cottage Road story again in the next decade. Then a new manager took over to run the cinema, **Henry William Buck**.

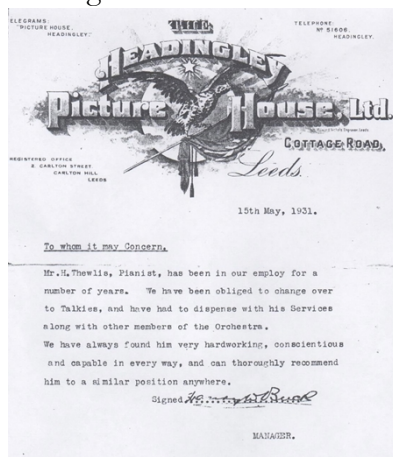
Owen Brooks deserves a footnote: he stayed on in Headingley, at his home in Winston Gardens, where he died in September 1947 aged 84. He was remembered in the *Yorkshire Evening Post* as a Leeds cinema pioneer and founder of Headingley Picture House. He never lost his enthusiasm for cinema: in later years he managed the Ritz Cinema at Cross Gates and travelled there every day until just before he died.



Advertisements from cinema programmes

### The arrival of the Talkies

During the 1920s a number of further alterations were made to the building including a smart glass canopy at the front. Technical adaptations had to be made in 1931 with the coming of sound. First introduced in 1929, it was viewed by some as a passing fad, but all cinemas finally had to change over. At Cottage Road a 'battery' room was provided for the equipment, and the long-serving Cottage Road orchestra had to be disbanded. The letter from the Manager giving a reference for the pianist Mr Herbert Thewlis in May 1931 is tinged with regret – 'We have been obliged to change over to Talkies'.



The last silent film to be screened was *Wild Company* (USA 1930), a romantic comedy starring the British actor H. B. Warner. The cinema closed for a week while the new Western Electric Sound system was installed. It reopened on 18 May 1931 with its first talkie – *On Approval*, a British comedy with Tom Walls and Yvonne Arnaud. A new era had begun.

HW Buck, Mr Thewlis' reference, 15 May 1931

### **Change of Ownership – under threat.**

In 1937 the Headingley Picture House Company folded following the collapse of the Atkinsons' building firm, and the cinema had to be sold. The buyer was **Frank Thompson**, owner of the Golden Acre Amusement Park at Bramhope, a showman and entrepreneur with family interests in cinema. He had grand plans to build a new super-cinema at the junction of St Anne's Road and Otley Road (where the allotments are now) to be called The Trocadero; the Cottage Road cinema would be closed down to eliminate competition. But there was strong opposition and serious financial problems on the horizon, so his ambitious scheme was never put into effect. The cinema in Cottage Road survived the day.

A year later, in 1938, Thompson sold the cinema for £12,999 to the Leeds-based company **Associated Tower Cinemas**, which continued to run it for over 65 years, until 2005. It remained open throughout the Second World War – indeed this was a boom time, as for all cinemas. People craved escape from the grey austerity of wartime into the glamorous world of the screen.

### **Post-war modernisation**

After the war, in the early 50s, there was a move to modernise. Changes were made to the interior, including covering over the exposed steel roof trusses which dated from its garage days, but distinctive older features like the wooden panelling of the entrance hall were retained. The cinema's name was changed to **Cottage Road Cinema** and further changes to the interior followed, including the alteration of the small circle into higher level seating.

As a small, comfortable suburban cinema, Cottage Road enjoyed a regular clientele. The manager of the time, John Broadley, recalls that people occupied the same seats every Saturday, the staff knew many of their names, and the atmosphere was friendly and homely. Courting couples enjoyed the double seats at the back!

### **The Leeds Film Society**

In 1951 the Leeds Film Society decided to move its programme of foreign and 'art' films to Cottage Road instead of The Tatler in town, bringing a new and prestigious clientele with them. The opening night of the season on 14 October 1951 was a memorable occasion, with Lord Harewood, President of the Film Society, and Lady Harewood in the audience, together with Hugh Gaitskell, Chancellor of the Exchequer and MP for South Leeds, and his wife. A Danish film was featured. Hosting the Film Society was quite a coup for the cinema.

### **Decision time**

In 1972, at a time when many cinemas were closing and popular entertainment was being revolutionised by the advent of television, Associated Tower Cinemas had to consider the future viability of Cottage Road Cinema and The Lounge, which it had bought in 1970. Could two cinemas so close to each other be sustained? The decision was taken to keep them both open, and to spend money on refurbishment. As a result, £20,000 was spent on modernising and improving Cottage Road cinema, and both cinemas continued to operate successfully.



Derrick Todd (left) with Osman Pickthall, 1982

In 1982 the cinema celebrated its 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. The Manager at the time, Derrick Todd, produced a historical leaflet and wrote an article in the *Yorkshire Post* asking for

people's memories of the cinema. He was flooded with responses. A special show was organised on the anniversary evening, with film music played on a theatre organ, and some silent films with piano accompaniment, as well as the feature film *Chariots of Fire*. The evening finished with a champagne reception and was hugely successful.

### **In the nick of time...**

In 2005 Associated Tower Cinemas made a decision to end its involvement with cinemas and concentrate on its property portfolio (it is now ATC Properties Ltd). It suddenly closed the Lounge cinema in January 2005, in spite of a protest campaign. Cottage Road cinema almost suffered the same fate. It was due to close at the end of July 2005 and staff had been issued with redundancy notices. However, in a last minute deal, the cinema was taken over by Mr **Charles Morris** and became part of the **Northern Morris** group of six independent cinemas. Again Cottage Road was saved from closure.

The cinema continues to offer a varied programme of current releases. With the active support of the Far Headingley Village Society, it has also introduced a special classic film night: "Classics at the Cottage", which has become a very popular feature, when patrons can watch classic films in the traditional surroundings of this long-established cinema, with vintage advertisements and film items from the period.

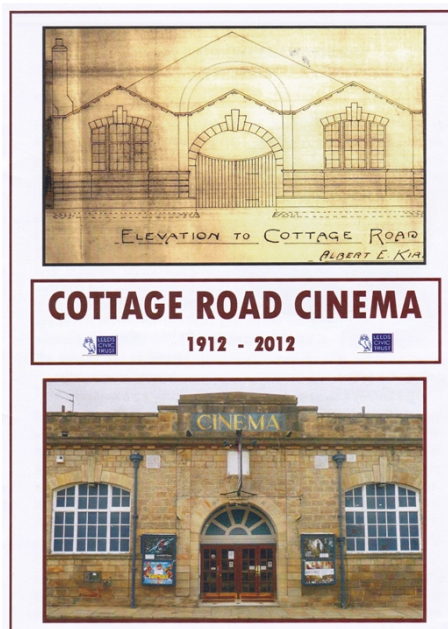
### **Celebrating 100 years – and more ...**

The Cottage Road cinema is certainly the oldest surviving suburban cinema still in operation in Leeds, probably in England, perhaps even further afield: a remarkable tale of survival and last-minute rescue which would make a good film script in itself. Many Leeds residents have fond memories of their visits there and it is held in great affection by its patrons. Long may it continue to entertain, amuse and thrill its audiences.

### **Eveleigh Bradford**

Local Historian, 2012, revised 2022

First published by Far Headingley Village Society in 2012 in celebration of the centenary of the cinema.



The photos of programmes and advertisements are from the collection of Derrick Todd.

See the gallery for the other [Cinemas in Headingley](#).