

CINEMAS HEADINGLEY



THE LOUNGE 1916 - 2005

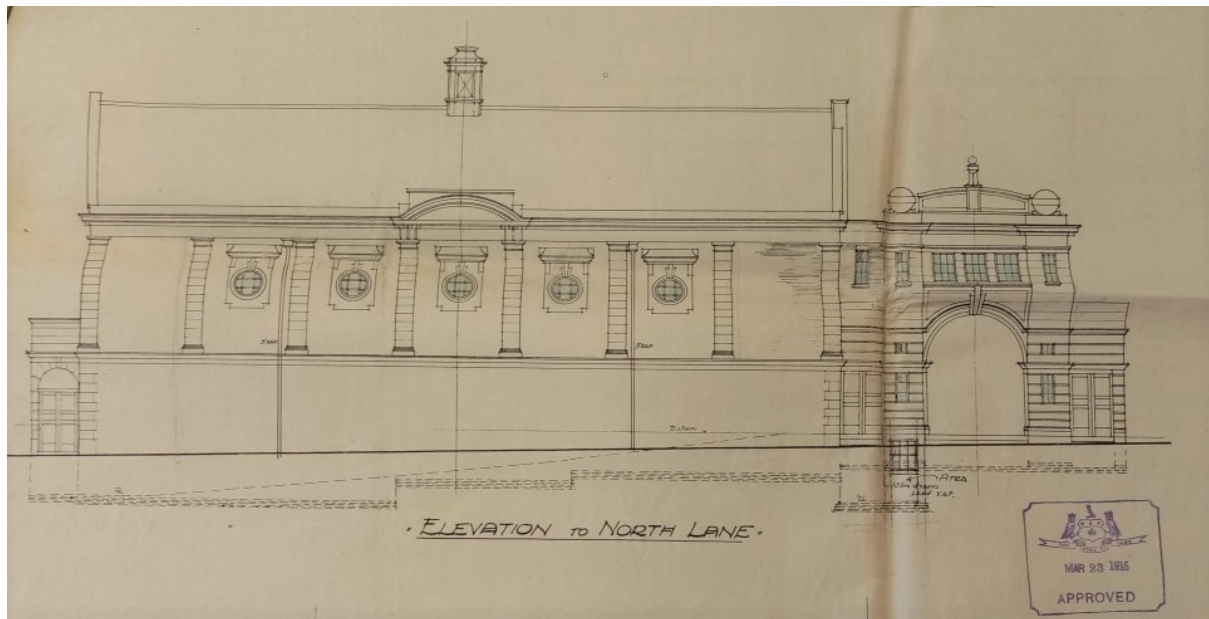
The Opening

On **2 October 1916** a new, luxurious, state-of-the-art cinema opened in North Lane in the heart of Headingley. It stood on the site of an abandoned tannery yard, set back from the road, squeezed incongruously between a row of ancient cottages and the garden wall of a handsome old house on the corner with Ash Road. The new **North Lane Picture Lounge** was a striking building of red brick and white faience with a grand arched entrance; it had been designed by the Leeds architects **Chadwick and Watson** who specialised in theatre and cinema work - their most ambitious project was the Alhambra Theatre in Bradford, which had opened two years before. The new Picture Lounge (soon known simply as '**The Lounge**') echoed on a smaller scale the Alhambra's eye-catching use of white marble-like faience, a brilliant foil to the surrounding dark stone and soot-blackened brick. This new venture, costing almost £9000, was the flagship of a specially formed company of two local businessmen, later absorbed by **Leeds and District Picture Houses Ltd**, which ran a group of Leeds cinemas.

Rivals

This was the era of the cinema boom, in the midst of the Great War, with audiences looking for relief from the grim, heart-breaking daily lists of casualties, and escape from long dark evenings as new blackout restrictions limited opening hours and street lighting. Cinemas were springing up all over Leeds, though not all prospered or survived. Many were in re-purposed buildings, like the nearby **Headingley Picture House** in Cottage Road which opened in 1912 in a converted garage, and the **Hyde Park Picture House** of 1914, adapted from a social club in Brudenell

Road. The brand-new purpose-built **Lounge** brought unwelcome competition - 'that bloody big white elephant' the Cottage Road owner called it.



Elevation of The Lounge, 1915

Unlike its rivals **The Lounge** could boast the best modern facilities: up-to-date ventilation, heating and cooling, a spacious auditorium, with circle and stalls seating 765 people in comfortable tip-up seats, even a cleaning system 'by the vacuum method' built into the walls. Its attractions included a soft-carpeted spacious lounge with a cosy fireplace (hence its name), lavish artistic decorations in cream, brown and gold offset with white marble, a café for refreshments, and a large orchestra to accompany the films and provide musical interludes. Going to 'the pictures' was a treat, and customers were greeted with due ceremony by the Manager, an ex-military man, in full evening dress.

Showing Tonight...

The Lounge's opening feature film was an American Western, 'Tennessee's Pardner', a drama based on a story by Bret Harte – silent and black-and-white of course. The programme changed twice a week, Monday to Wednesday then Thursday to Saturday, with matinees 3 or 4 times a week (closed on Sundays, as was the rule). Seats were 3d, 6d or a shilling (old money) – affordable for many working folk, though with no cheap 2d seats as at the Hyde Park Picture House. Saturday nights were particularly popular, with queues of people sometimes turned away. The programme usually included a main feature film, often with a short serial to lure people back for the next cliff-hanging episode, alongside a range of comedy or travel shorts and the fortnightly Pathe Gazette, bringing the news to vivid life (subject to censorship, like all films). Three weeks after the cinema opened it featured the War Office propaganda film 'The King's visit to the Somme' designed to encourage and hearten home audiences – cinema the ideal new medium for spreading the official message in powerful visual form. The Lounge manager's declared aim was to provide 'only the most select, informative and instructive films' ranging across drama, comedy, and documentaries. It was to win a reputation for the high quality of its programmes.

'A Temple of Music'

Alongside the films, music was the Lounge's great speciality, marking it out from its many competitors. The first **Musical Director, Fred Kitchen**, the 'most famous musical director in the North', had a talented (and well-paid) 15-strong **orchestra** under his wing, which gained a reputation for skill in matching their music to events on the silent screen, as well as providing

top-class musical interludes – the programme always vetted by the local police Watch Committee, like the films. The famous Lounge orchestra set the standard for all the others, and the cinema housed a library of music scores for other Musical Directors to borrow.



YEP, 15 Nov 1919

Alban Chambers, 1935

Guide to Leeds, 1920

In 1919 the Lounge’s musical offerings were enhanced when its new Managing Director, the film pioneer **Leonard Denham**, who had a special interest in music, commissioned a 3-manual **orchestral organ** for the cinema, to be built by Conacher & Co. of Huddersfield at a massive cost of £2500. It required complex re-building and installation work, including a motor ordered from Brooks of Huddersfield to go in the basement to pump the air. The organ’s much-heralded opening performance took place on **27 November 1919**, with **W. H. Leopold Jackson FRCO** as resident organist. It was a splendid occasion: as a finale he and the orchestra played the rousing Grand March from ‘Tannhäuser’ to huge applause, and everyone in the packed audience received a glossy commemorative brochure, ‘Better Music and Better Pictures’. The Lounge could now indeed claim to be ‘A veritable Temple of Music.’ The organ recitals drew the crowds, especially when a brilliant new young organist was appointed in 1924: **H Alban Chambers**, organist at St Anne’s Cathedral, who had made headlines in 1913 when he was appointed organist there at age eleven, a ‘young Mozart’. He qualified as ARCM and FRCO over the next years and his virtuoso performances at the Lounge were a high point.

Vocalists were initially banned from accompanying the orchestra, with a couple of specific exceptions for hymns, to avoid any hint of competition with the Music Halls, but in **1923** this rule was relaxed. For the film of Hall Caine’s ‘The Prodigal Son’ that October, the Lounge manager brought in the **Headingley Male Voice Choir** to accompany the film, and their singing of ‘Abide with me’ during the final tragic scene was said to have moved the audience profoundly: the Lounge won high praise for this ‘notable departure in cinema entertainment’. The police still used to check that the cinema was keeping to the rules: in **1927** the Lounge manager was prosecuted for allowing singing after the film had ended, but the charge was dismissed. The ban on Sunday performances was also relaxed for one-off charity events – in **1924**, for example, the orchestra joined the Leeds Railway Clerks Operatic Society in a concert for the ‘**Boots for Bairns Fund**’, founded in 1921 to provide shoes and clothing for Leeds poor

children. (It was not until much later, in the 1950s, that the Lounge began opening regularly on Sunday.) In the later 1920s the Lounge's '**Musical Fridays**' were a special attraction, with the orchestra, the organ, and top 'artistes', often with a theme: Gilbert and Sullivan Night; Vaudeville Night, and so on – a real night out.

A new manager

The cinema prospered, enjoying a long period of continuity from 1923 when **Andrew Robertson** was appointed manager. From a theatrical background himself, he was to remain manager for the next 30 years, until his sudden death in 1953. He helped to steer the Lounge through the technical, financial and social challenges of the next three decades, including the dark days of another war.



YEP, 26 March 1923



YEP, 19 August 1929

The arrival of the talkies

The arrival of 'talking' films in 1928 posed a particular challenge to cinemas everywhere. Some dismissed the new development as a flash in the pan, but the management of the Lounge took it seriously: Andrew Robertson and the Lounge projectionist were sent to London to see and report back on the first talkie, 'The Jazz Singer', featuring Al Jolson. The Managing Director, Leonard Denham, decided that the Lounge should get ahead of the game and invest immediately in the new sound equipment required: one of the first of the Leeds suburban cinemas to take the plunge. No easy task: huge loudspeakers had to be installed in the auditorium, the organ moved to the side, and the stage front rebuilt with expensive oak panelling. Within a few months, in **August 1929**, the Lounge could advertise itself as the '**Sound**' Cinema of Headingley, showing 'The Doctor's Secret', a Paramount All-Talking Picture. The programme still included some silent shorts and recitals by the organ but this development spelt sudden death for the acclaimed orchestra and soon for the treasured organ – the musicians lost their jobs and the organist **Alban Chambers** moved to London, to play at the famous Astoria in Brixton. Lounge customers complained bitterly, and for years the organ, played just occasionally for special concerts, remained like a phantom in its place in the auditorium, with a spotlight focussed on it in the intervals while gramophone music played, until it was finally scrapped in the 1950s.

The Thirties – the changing scene

Meanwhile the environment was changing. In 1931/32 **North Lane** was widened to allow trams to run through from Cardigan Road to the Otley Road on match days and when returning to the tram sheds at Far Headingley. This long-planned project – the reason the Lounge had

been built set back from the road – required the purchase and subsequent demolition by the Council of several old properties along North Lane, including the adjoining cottages and the picturesque old house called **Tannery House** next to the cinema. Its garden, which ran down to the corner with **Ash Road**, was turned into a public Garden of Rest, now **the Rose Garden**, a welcome green space among the grey streets. The road-widening meant the Lounge lost the use of the border of land (originally garden and then car park) which had run along its North Lane frontage. On the other side of the cinema, land was acquired to provide a new car park, an increasingly valuable asset as car ownership increased. The Lounge projectionist noted that the effects of the Depression were not as deeply felt in Headingley and the nearby suburbs as in other areas of the city; no doubt the Lounge benefitted and needed its car park for the new affluent car-owners.

Wartime

The Lounge like all cinemas and places of entertainment had to close when war was declared on 3 September 1939, but the closure was reversed almost immediately as the importance of cinema in providing entertainment, boosting home morale, and influencing public opinion was recognised. Only a fortnight later, on 19 September, the Lounge like many other Leeds cinemas had **reopened**, showing ‘Topper takes a trip’, an American comedy to lift the spirits. Over the wartime years the cinema had to cope with the pressures of the time: the blackout, stringent air-raid and fire regulations (it had its own Wardens), emergency procedures and special demands. In June **1940** it was one of the many Leeds cinemas which responded to an appeal for recreation facilities for the battalions of men stationed in Leeds after the evacuation from Dunkirk, offering a number of free seats. It also acted as a venue for special one-off events: in **1941** a meeting organised by the Leeds Council for Christian Action on ‘building a new world order’; in **1944** a Grand Concert organised by the British Legion to raise funds; in February **1945** a meeting for young people with the Bishop of Ripon as speaker, urging against defeatism. The Lounge’s regular programme covered the range of popular films, mainly American, sometimes with the added novelty of colour – in July **1940** it was showing the animated film ‘Gulliver’s Travels’, **‘Movie Magic in Gorgeous Technicolour’**. Throughout the years of war audience numbers surged as people turned to the cinema for relief, entertainment and news. The Lounge prospered, reportedly investing over £3000 in new equipment in 1947.



The Lounge, 1953

Survival - and then Closure

Post-war, as the century rolled on, the Lounge adapted to the demands of the time: to the many technological advances in the film industry; to the competition from television; to shifts in the make-up of the local population; to changes in ownership. It survived all these challenges – as, remarkably, did its old Headingley competitors at Cottage Road and Hyde Park – keeping going

in an increasingly difficult environment, while many other cinemas around the city closed their doors for ever or took on new guises as bingo or snooker halls.

In **1970** the Lounge was acquired by the Leeds firm **Associated Tower Cinemas** (ATC), which owned several cinemas, including Cottage Road. Various improvements were carried out, culminating in a major refurbishment in **1999** with a new curved extension to house a restaurant and bar on the side facing the Rose Garden. However, in **2005** the firm announced its decision to end its involvement with cinemas and concentrate on its property portfolio (it is now **ATC Properties Ltd**). In January 2005, after almost ninety years of operation, the cinema was finally and abruptly **closed**, in spite of a hard-fought campaign for its preservation from local people with a deep affection for the cinema and belief in its continuing viability. The adjacent restaurant and bar were kept open but for several years the old cinema building stood empty, looking sadly neglected. In **2009** planning and conservation permission was given to ATC to develop the site (£6m) and work began in **2012**. The distinctive, handsome cinema facade was preserved along North Lane, where it was within the local Conservation Area, propped up like a film-set itself (see the gallery). Behind it, the main cinema building was demolished and replaced by a new build of apartments with a shop (currently Sainsbury's) at ground level. As you look down North Lane today, just the ghost of the Lounge lingers on as a shadowy reminder of what was once called 'the most beautifully appointed picture house in Yorkshire'.

Eveleigh Bradford

Local Historian, 2022



Preserved facade of The Lounge, 2017

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