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# Collective dreams: A History of Bath's Cinemas

*Aaron Evans*

**A**round 1870 William Friese-Green set up a photographer's studio in Bath with his partner, John Rudge. When Friese-Green died in 1921 he was buried in Highgate Cemetery under the inscription 'The Inventor of Kinematography'. The accuracy of this tribute is widely disputed but, nevertheless, Bath can at least lay claim to being the home of not just a number of fine cinemas, but perhaps even the invention of cinema itself.

For the resident and the visitor to Bath alike there are two plaques in New Bond Street Place, which are often overlooked but which signal the achievement of John Arthur Roebuck Rudge [fig. 1] and William Friese-Green [fig. 2]. To Rudge is attributed the invention of the 'Biophantascope', which sounds like a mad scientist's invention in a Fu Manchu movie, but was in fact a rudimentary projector containing several slides which, when rotated, projected the illusion of a moving image on to a screen. Friese-Green developed the idea further, experimenting with strips of celluloid mounted on the inside of a revolving drum. Despite patenting his invention in 1890, neither he nor his partner received any financial gain for these early forays into the medium of film due to their lack of success in developing the idea commercially. Both men died penniless, but their ground-breaking efforts have earned them a place in history and laid the foundations of the film industry that followed.

The first showing of moving pictures for payment in Bath would have come about from the visits of travelling showmen who put on a Bioscope Show, which was a fairground attraction consisting of a travelling cinema using a rudimentary form of projector. The films were often produced by the showmen themselves. The heyday of the Bioscope was from the late 1890s until World War I. Bioscope shows were fronted by large fairground organs; these formed the public face of the show. A stage was usually set up in front of the organ, and dancing girls would entertain the crowds between film shows.

A film programme could consist of fifteen minutes on a fairground cinematograph show, a ten minute presentation within a music-hall setting or a two hour stand alone cinema show in a town or civic hall. Exhibitors in the Bristol and Bath area included the Poole Brothers of Poole's

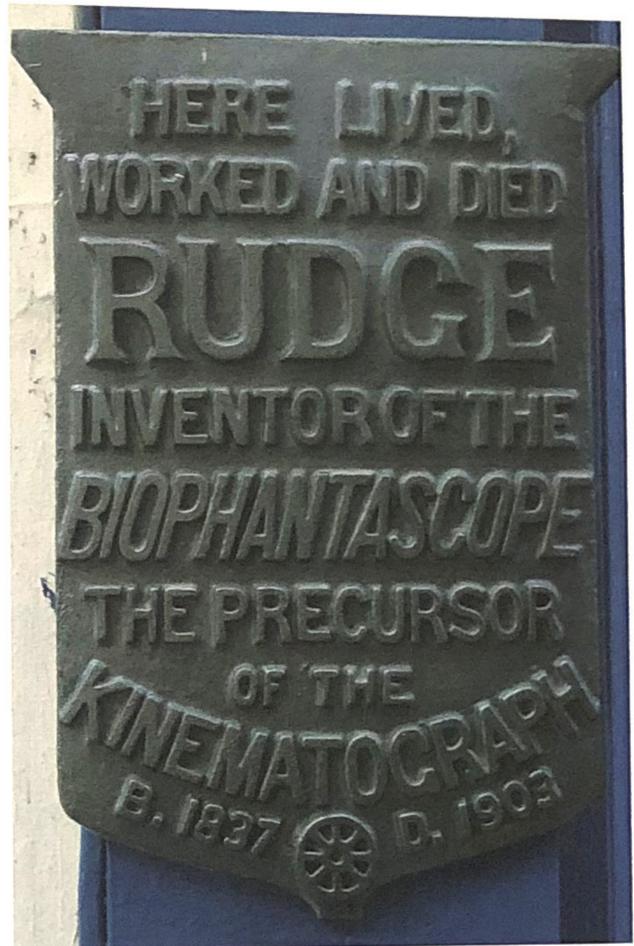


fig 1: Plaque commemorating Arthur Roebuck Rudge, New Bond Street Place, Bath, 2007

*Photograph - Dan Brown*

Myiorama and Ralph Pringle of the North American Animated Photo Company. John Bird wrote, in *Cinema Parade* that,

'Hundreds of those early picture shows excited crowds on fairgrounds, in empty shops, in town halls, temperance rooms and music halls. And when the cinema came, the manager was often a blend of the fairground showman, the travelling theatre proprietor and the panorama lecturer'.

Apart from open air and tented shows in Sydney Gardens, it is likely that the Assembly Rooms and the Pump Room were also venues for similar shows in the late 1890s. The Palace Theatre in Saw Close also lays claim to these novelty shows along with the Theatre Royal. These would last a mere ten or fifteen minutes, in a programme of two or more hours.

With the financial success of the moving picture spreading widely, competition arose amongst the venues of Bath. The Avon Animated Picture Company exhibited at the Jubilee Hall, performances were given twice nightly and Saturday matinees were also a feature. With this success came challenges to the growth of this new entertainment. Buildings used for the purpose of showing films were potentially dangerous places for crowds, film stock itself being a highly dangerous material, easily ignited. When the Cinematograph Act 1909 was passed, to set standards for fire control and means of escape, it meant that many halls previously used for the purpose of showing films would now not conform and the era of the purpose-built cinema was ushered in with the force of the Act in 1910.

The first of the purpose built venues was the *Bath Electric Theatre* at 22 Westgate Street (later to become *The Beau Nash*). It opened in late 1910 and had a seating capacity of 220. It was designed by the noted theatre architect Bertie Crewe. The second cinema was opened in 1911 by the same company, in Southgate. *The Picturedrome* boasted 580 seats. The third of Bath's cinemas to spring into being had its debut just across the road from *The Bath Electric* in Westgate Street. *The Vaudeville Electric Theatre* opened on December 4th 1911 with an auditorium of 330 seats. For most of the time it was operating it was managed by a Mr. A.E. Vaughan.

Around the same time, in 1913, a fourth cinema arrived to compete with these three and it involved the conversion of a skating rink. It was not unusual to see such buildings, the fruits of a craze that had swept the nation, left empty and abandoned when the craze had passed. The problem of what to do with a large hall built for a purpose, which was now no longer of interest, often led to cinemas going out of business. Those buildings that did survive found other uses. It was not easy, but in this case the *Coliseum Cinema* in St. James' Street successfully replaced the Central Rink. It had a seating capacity of over 1,000.

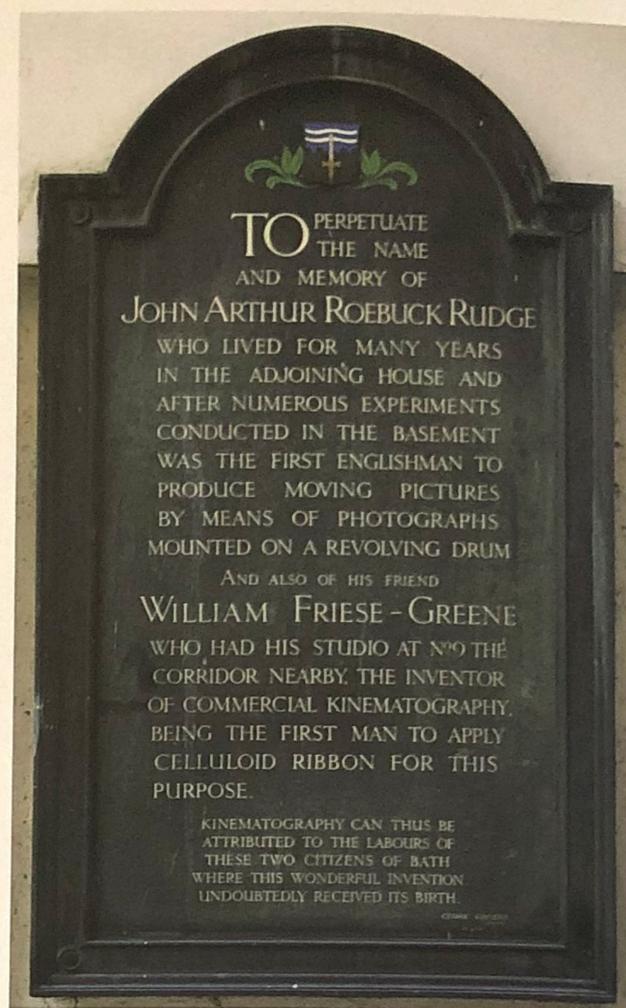


fig 2: Plaque commemorating Arthur Roebuck Rudge and William Friese-Greene, New Bond Street Place, Bath, 2007

Photograph - Dan Brown

By now the existing cinema operators were complaining about the explosion of the number of cinemas which was putting an unhealthy strain on their ability to fill seats. They even lobbied the Bath Corporation to prevent the opening of new cinemas. To no avail, the City fathers would judge each new venture on its merits.

In 1914, with the advent of the Great War there were new opportunities and challenges to the growth of cinema. Some venues depended on the showing of war news footage and the desire for 'live' action. But, others, perhaps due to staff being conscripted, perhaps due to the building itself being seized for the war effort, closed and never re-opened. This was to be the fate of *The Coliseum* which closed and never re-opened. Those Bath cinemas that did survive were successful and even thrived. They were packed out night after night by soldiers billeted in the city. An extension, designed by Mowbray Green, was even added to *The Picturedrome* in Southgate to accommodate the growing audiences. A typical programme for the *Electric Cinema* in Westgate Street during these war years was *The Tailor of Bond Street*, a comedy drama and *The Exploits of Elaine*, a serial. But this diet of escapist entertainment was shattered by the showing of *The Battle of the Somme* in 1916. It had already been seen by almost half the population of the

UK by the time it opened in both *The Vaudeville* and *The Picturedrome*. At the time, *The Bath Chronicle* wrote that these Bath picture houses were literally besieged by cinemagoers on the first three days of the shows. So powerful was the film in its depiction of what modern warfare was really like, that audiences, used to providing rowdy accompaniments to silent films, were stunned into silence.

By 1918 and the end of the war, interest in cinema was on the increase for a public still desperate for entertainment. To meet this growing trend, Bath's first cinema *The Electric* closed on April 18th 1920 and was re-constructed by architect Alfred J. Taylor into a larger cinema which had 740 seats (540 in the stalls and 200 in the circle). It re-opened as *The Beau Nash Cinema* in 22 and 23 Westgate Street on December 16th 1920 with a classical style facade in local Bath stone. [fig. 3]

In these early years from 1910 to 1930, other venues which were not dedicated cinemas, continued to operate. In 1921 the Pump Room management applied for a cinema licence renewal, which was turned down. This seems to have ended any connection with film for that particular venue. The Pump Room had been licenced to operate, along with the Assembly

Rooms, from 1915 and the Assembly Rooms continued to show films in the Ballroom until 1926 when *The Assembly Rooms Cinema* was taken over by *The Savoy Cinema*, later to become *ABC Cinemas*, run from Regent Street, London. The Assembly Rooms continued to show films, even installing a new sound system in 1931, until it finally closed its doors to cinemagoers in June 1934. [fig. 4]



fig 3: The Beau Nash Cinema, Westgate Street, Bath, March 1972. Showing *Please Sir*.

*Bath in Time - Bath Central Library Collection*



fig 4: The Assembly Rooms from Bennet Street, Bath, 1931. Showing *The Maltese Falcon*  
*Bath in Time - Bath Central Library Collection*

the building housed a café and dance hall as well as a large screen, with 2,139 seats. The magnificent interior which boasts a dome and chandeliers is pure Art Deco and currently it is listed Grade II\*.

At around the same time, nearby in Southgate, *The Picturedrome* had been taken over by Union Cinemas and renamed *The Regal* with a seating capacity of 863 (714 in the stalls and 149 in the circle). It was eventually taken over by Odeon Theatres Ltd in July 1935 and refurbished to become *The Odeon*, Southgate [fig. 5]. The building had a Bath stone façade in the classical style and an auditorium with a deeply curved barrel roof. [fig. 6]

Meanwhile an unusual hybrid of theatre and cinema was emerging in St. Michael's Place. In January 1936 *The Little Theatre* was opened by Consuela de Reyes. It was to be a blend of theatre and cinema. With 218 seats and a stage it provided 6 dressing rooms and a café. It would show films and live theatre, alternating between the two. It is still known fondly as *The Little*. Its origins go back to the early years of the twentieth century and to an organisation known as Citizen House. This was

In the same era, the existing cinemas in Bath continued to operate successfully. In fact in 1921 another cinema was added to the list, it was *The Oldfield Park Cinema*, located, unsurprisingly, in Oldfield Park. In July 1929, this was the first cinema to fit sound, beating *The Beau Nash* by one week. In the preceding years, *The Beau Nash* had undergone further enlargement to reach a seating capacity of 1,088. The first talking picture to be seen, and heard, in Bath, was Al Jolson in *The Singing Fool*.

The apogee of the growth of these dream palaces in Bath at this time was surely the largest cinema ever built in the city. In 1934 *The Forum Cinema* was constructed in Southgate Street, the architect was W. H. Watkin and E. M. Wilmott assisted by A. Stuart Gray. The



fig 5: The Odeon Cinema, Southgate Street, 15 October 1962. Showing *Advise & Consent*  
*Bath in Time - Bath Central Library Collection*

a community centre, home to a wide range of voluntary societies concerned with welfare, education and the arts.

Hilary King, the present owner of the building and guardian of *The Little* for many years, writes 'It had been established in 1913 by Helen Hope, a pioneer in social welfare, Bath's first woman councillor and a JP, and it was here in 1915 that my mother, Consuela de Reyes, Helen Hope's colleague and successor, set up a community theatre group known as The Citizen House Players.'

Her aim was to make theatre accessible to people with little opportunity for cultural pursuits and to involve them in all aspects of stage production. By the early 1930s Consuela de Reyes had bought *The Everyman Theatre* in Hampstead as a London base for her work and, with her stage designer husband Peter King, she commissioned an architect to design a building for Bath that would function both as a theatre and news cinema. In 1936, *The Little* opened with a continuous hourly programme that changed twice weekly. True to the educational roots that had spawned the idea, the first programme contained a newsreel, a documentary on the Royal Academy, and a film on the life history of the frog. It was also around this time that Haile Selassie, the exiled Emperor of Ethiopia, came to the cinema to watch newsreels of the invasion of his country by Italian forces. In 1939, feature films became a regular part of *The Little's* film programme, interspersed as before with stage productions, and this pattern continued until 1948 when *The Little* became a full-time cinema.

In the 1930s Depression, with many people out of work, the cinemas that survived were *The Forum*, Southgate, *The Odeon*, Southgate, *The Beau Nash*, Westgate Street and *The Little Theatre*. *The Theatre Royal* operated with its main shows on stage and *The Palace Theatre* still provided for tastes in music hall and variety. The 1930s also saw the first example of Bath and its environs being used as a location for a major feature film when, in 1931 Camerton Station was used as the setting for *The Ghost Train* starring Jack Hulbert, Cicely Courtneidge and Arnold Ridley (the playwright on whose play the film was based, who was later to gain fame as Private Godfrey in *Dad's Army*). With the coming of the Second World War, once again cinemas provided a much needed relief from the war with programmes of films such as *Casablanca* and *Mrs. Miniver*.

It was the 1950s that saw the growth of television and a fall in cinema going. Having enjoyed some fifty years as one of the most popular and successful forms of entertainment in the modern era, cinema going was then seriously in decline. Audience numbers began to fall off drastically for



fig 6: The deeply curved barrel ceiling inside the Odeon Cinema, Southgate Street, c.1970

*Bath in Time* - Bath Preservation Trust Collection



fig 7: The Scala in Oldfield Park, November 1962, shortly after conversion to a discount store  
*Bath in Time - Bath Central Library Collection*

a variety of reasons. Improved housing and affordable television sets were reducing the incentive for families to go out for entertainment. Hollywood was no longer making so many films as escapist family entertainment but instead was turning out films with a more adult tone, the X-rated film. The rise of Rock and Roll also had a double-edged effect; it saw the increase in a younger audience with films like *Rock Around the Clock* and *The Girl Can't Help It* but resulted in a decline in the family audience.

As audiences melted away, cinema owners sought to bring them back with larger screens by embracing Cinemascope, showing the big musical and epic films like *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben Hur*. This was installed in all of Bath's screens

except *The Little Theatre* although eventually even there it was fitted. *The Scala* had a screen 36 ft wide, but *The Forum* had the largest screen, over 47ft across. *The Palace*, with its small screen and still catering for variety shows, finally succumbed and closed in 1955.

By the 1960s, numbers had not been restored to the heyday of cinema going and in America, still the industry engine for film production, Stanley H. Durwood became the father of the 'multiplex' movie theatre. In 1963 he opened the first ever mall multiplex, composed of two side-by-side theaters with 700 seats at Ward Parkway Center in Kansas City. Three years later, Durwood introduced the world's first four-plex and then in 1969, he built a six-plex with automated projection booths. The writing was on the wall for the single screen Movie Theatre.

At the beginning of the 1960s, despite the changing fortunes of an uncertain cinema-going public, British film making became a force in its own right, producing for example the stark realities of *This Sporting Life* and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*. Then, in 1963, when London became the music and fashion capital of Europe, the seriousness of these films gave way to movies that sought to capture the playfulness of 'Swinging London', films like *Tom Jones*, a bawdy eighteenth century tale of illegitimacy and promiscuity. This was shot on location around Bath. *A Hard Day's Night* was another, an exuberant musical shot in black and white and starred the Beatles.



fig 8: The entrance to the Little Theatre before renovation, c.1970  
*Bath in Time - Bath Central Library Collection*

As the decade progressed, cinema battled against the increasing popularity of television and the casualties were the cinemas that could not or would not adapt. On Saturday December 13th 1969, *The Odeon* in Southgate closed, making way for a major redevelopment of the whole area. The audience had left the theatre after the closing credits when John Wayne and Rock Hudson had fought their way to glory in *The Undefeated*. *The Scala* was transformed in 1962 from cinema to food store [fig. 7] and eventually *The Forum* went over to Bingo, the fate of so many of the large auditoria across the country. *The Regency Dance Hall* followed and the *Gala Bingo Hall* is still in operation at the time of writing. *The Little Theatre* struggled on [fig. 8], along with *The Beau Nash*. The latter underwent another modernisation programme in 1971, reducing the seating to 733. It transformed the cinema into a luxury venue.

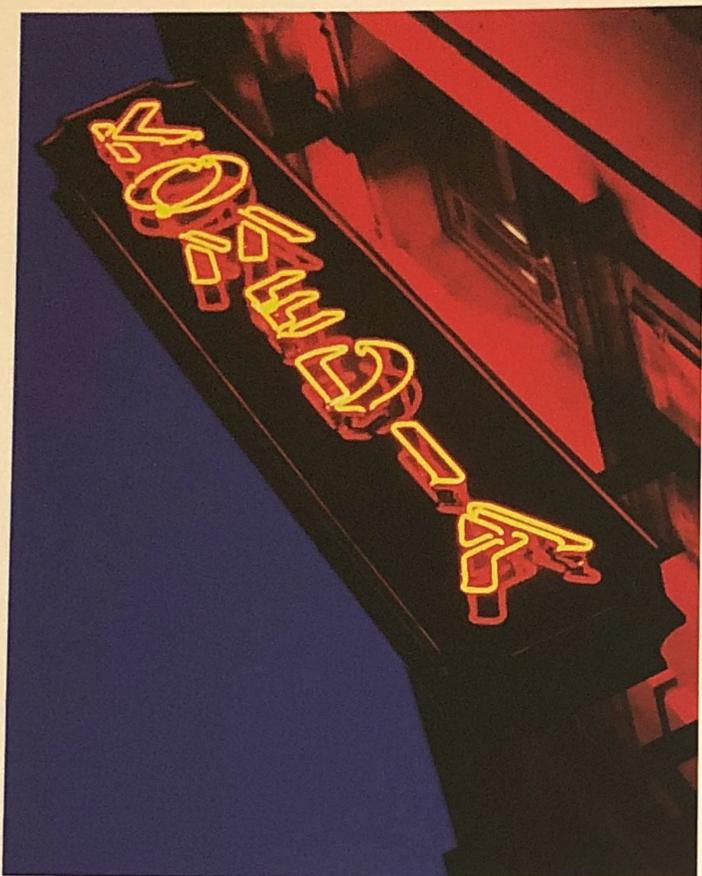
Cinemagoers did not completely disappear. The public still had an appetite for the silver screen and on July 15th 1976 a new venue opened in the old St. Paul's Church Hall in Monmouth Street. An heroic achievement by Mr. Jefferies of Box who carried out most of the conversion work with help from the projectionist Tim Hughes and members of the Jefferies family. This was a two-screen cinema called *The Gemini*, holding 126 seats in screen 1 and 136 seats in screen 2. This seemed to set a trend for smaller venues because another cinema made its appearance on the upper floor of the old *Palace Theatre* in Saw Close. Named *The President*, it was run by the same company, Zettlers Enterprises, who ran the Bingo Hall. It only had 53 seats and the films were shown in 16mm format, once a night.

But by the early 1980s cinema attendance was at an all time low. Film production increasingly targeted the affluent youth market catering for the teenager and young adult. The family audience was still in decline. By the mid-1980s three of Bath's five cinemas had closed, but *The Little* refused to die. Encouraged by a loyal band of supporters, the cinema fought for its survival, the theatre's original scene store and tea room were converted into a second screen and a total refurbishment began. By now *The Little* had two screens with 192 seats and 74 seats, another turn in the fortunes of this hardy little venue.

The corner was turning. Cinema owners point to the showing of *Ghostbusters* in 1984 as the film which brought audiences back into the cinema across the UK and certainly that is borne out by popular and critical acclaim, and the movie went on to become one of the best loved comedies of all time (according to Total Film it was ranked 44th in 2000 and the American Film Institute ranked it 28th in its top 100). It was as if a whole new generation had discovered the pleasures of cinema going and were then ready to move on to more adventurous fare.

*The Forum* eventually ended its romance with bingo and in August 1988 it was taken over by Bath City Church and has since been successfully used for both concerts and religious purposes. At the end of the decade *The Gemini* was taken over by Robins Cinemas when West End theatre impresario, Bill Freeman and his son Ben, took ownership of the cinema and in 1991 it was given a makeover; by now it was a three-screen cinema with 153 seats, 128 seats and 44 seats. *The President* had closed in 1986 but by the 1990s Bath was well served. There were more screens available than there had been at any one time.

In the late 90s and early 2000, Bristol was developing multiplex cinemas on its outskirts, between Bath and Bristol at Avon Meads, Longwell Green and Cribbs Causeway. These provided state-of-the-art sound systems with a wide choice of screens and plenty of car parking. Combined with fast food outlets, these theatres were proving a huge draw for family audiences.



**fig 9: Komedia, Westgate Street, Bath, 2010**  
 Photograph - Simon Giddings

earlier periods of decline underwent twinning or tripling to reduce auditorium size and increase choice. This listing was a mixed blessing for *The Beau Nash* as, with only one screen, it struggled through the early years of the twenty-first century and was eventually closed on October 22nd 2005. It remained vacant before it was leased at the end of 2007 to Komedia, a company from Brighton specialising in live comedy venues. It opened on the November 13th 2008 as *The Komedia Comedy Club*. [fig. 9]

Meanwhile the development of Bath's first truly multiplex cinema was proving to be a race between two possible locations. As part of plans for the redevelopment of Southgate the developers were planning to provide a multi-screen cinema as part of the complex. But another location was also in prospect as a rival to the Southgate development. In James Street West, a car dealership was closing and offered the chance for local developers to create a new venue in that part of the city. It was clear that the city could not support two such complexes and a number of operators had made it clear that they favoured Bath as a location. Eventually, the site that was chosen was James Street West. The Kingsmead Leisure complex,

Although many of the older film goers derided the 'popcorn generation', there was no doubt that Bath cinemas were losing out to these audiences.

Following a tough couple of years for Robins Cinemas Ltd., the chain went into receivership in 1997, closing all but three of its cinemas. Robins Bath, Camberley and Durham were bought back by the company's owners as they proved the most profitable. Eventually however *The Robins* in Bath gave way to the inevitable, the building was sold to the adjoining *Theatre Royal* and converted into a highly successful children's theatre, *The Egg*.

In 2001 the Odeon chain took back *Beau Nash* from ABC. The cinema had been listed in 1995 as a building of special historic interest. This listing, Grade II, recognised the significance of the venue and its history. However it also ensured that the building would not be able to be converted to accommodate more than the one screen. Diversity was the future for cinema going and those that struggled through



**fig 10: The Kingsmead Multiplex development, James Street West, Bath, 2007**  
 Aaron Evans Architects

with an 8-screen cinema, five restaurants, a café and a health club, opened on October 22nd 2004. [fig. 10] The developer was Deeley Freed (Penhalt) and local developer Charles Whateley working together with local architect Aaron Evans realised a dream that they had been working towards since the late 1990s, to provide Bath with its first multiplex cinema.

*The Little Theatre* has continually proved itself a resilient and imaginative provider of the collective dreams of movie makers and movie goers. The operation was taken over by Picturehouse cinemas, part of a network of art house cinemas in the United Kingdom under the management of City Screen Ltd. The company was co-funded by Lyn Goleby and Tony Jones. It is, in 2010, Bath's best loved art cinema and still bears testimony to the dream of the family who founded it in 1936.

Once considered 'merely popular entertainment' and not to be considered on the same terms as live theatre, cinema has in fact always been an established part of the culture of the city. There is now a thriving Film Festival that takes place once a year to encourage and develop an interest in film. Long may it continue.

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I would also like to record my thanks to Kirsten Elliott for her encouragement and for the notes on productions filmed in Bath 1931-2003.