

# WOKING'S MULTI-SCREEN CINEMA EXPERIENCE OF THE LATE 1930'S

Iain Wakeford 2016



With six screens at the Ambassador Cinema you could say that Woking's cinema-goers have never had it so good – but quantity is not always better than quality and besides had all the plans of the 1920 and 30's come to fruition the area could well have had more screens to view before the war than we do today.

Up until 1937 Woking had just two purpose-built cinemas – the Central Cinema in Chertsey Road (re-built and renamed the Plaza in 1929) and the Palace in Duke Street (rebuilt as the Astoria in 1931). Moving pictures had occasionally been shown at venues such as the Grand Theatre in Commercial Road, but essentially Woking was a 'two-screen' town.

In the late 1920's plans had been announced by Mr W F Kinns for a 500 seat cinema to be known as 'The Orient' at the junction of Guildford Road and Station Approach. It was to have a white-glazed terracotta and brick facade, with a circular ballroom (to be managed by the Elite Cinema of Kingston), but after

publishing drawings of the planned venue in the Surrey Advertiser early in February 1926 nothing seems to have come of the idea.

In April 1936 Mr J Morrison was given permission by Woking Council for 'preliminary plans for a new cinema to be erected at the junction of Maybury Road and Stanley Road', but again this scheme came to nought, possibly as at the same time plans were well in advance for another cinema (and shops) – this time on the corner of Church Street and Chobham Road.

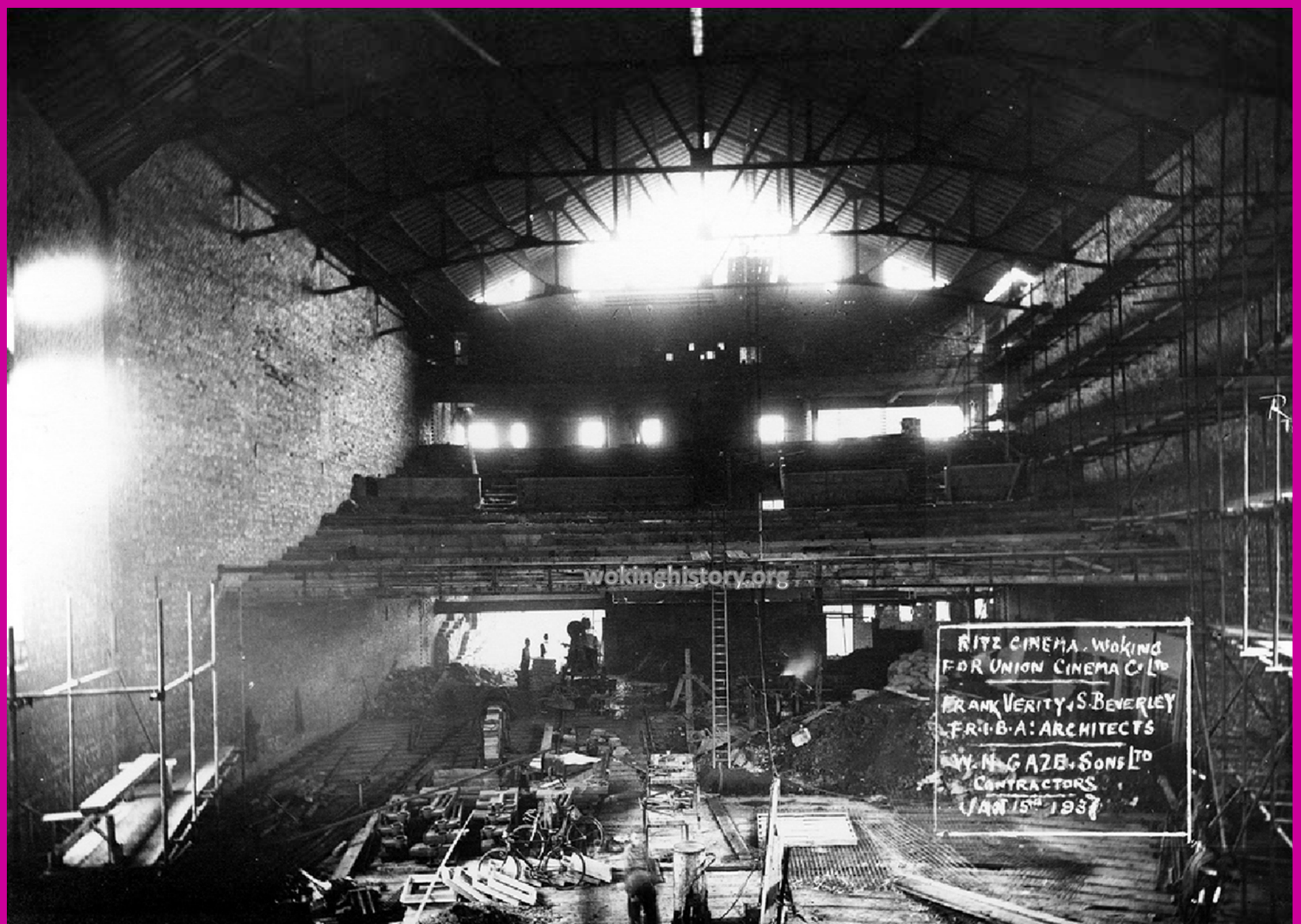
That was for the Union Cinemas 'Ritz' (designed by the celebrated theatre and cinema architects Frank Verity and his son-in-law Sam Beverley, and constructed by Gazes & Son), which finally opened its doors on the 12<sup>th</sup> April 1937 with a 'grand-gala' in front of a full-house of 1,600 people. The film 'The Texas Rangers' was shown, together with a 'mini-variety bill' on the stage including the Union Cinemas Ladies Accordion Band, 'The Wise Jesters', O'Shea and Jean ('the original staircase dancers') and

Harold Ramsey (Union Cinemas 'star' organist) playing the large Compton Organ that rose out

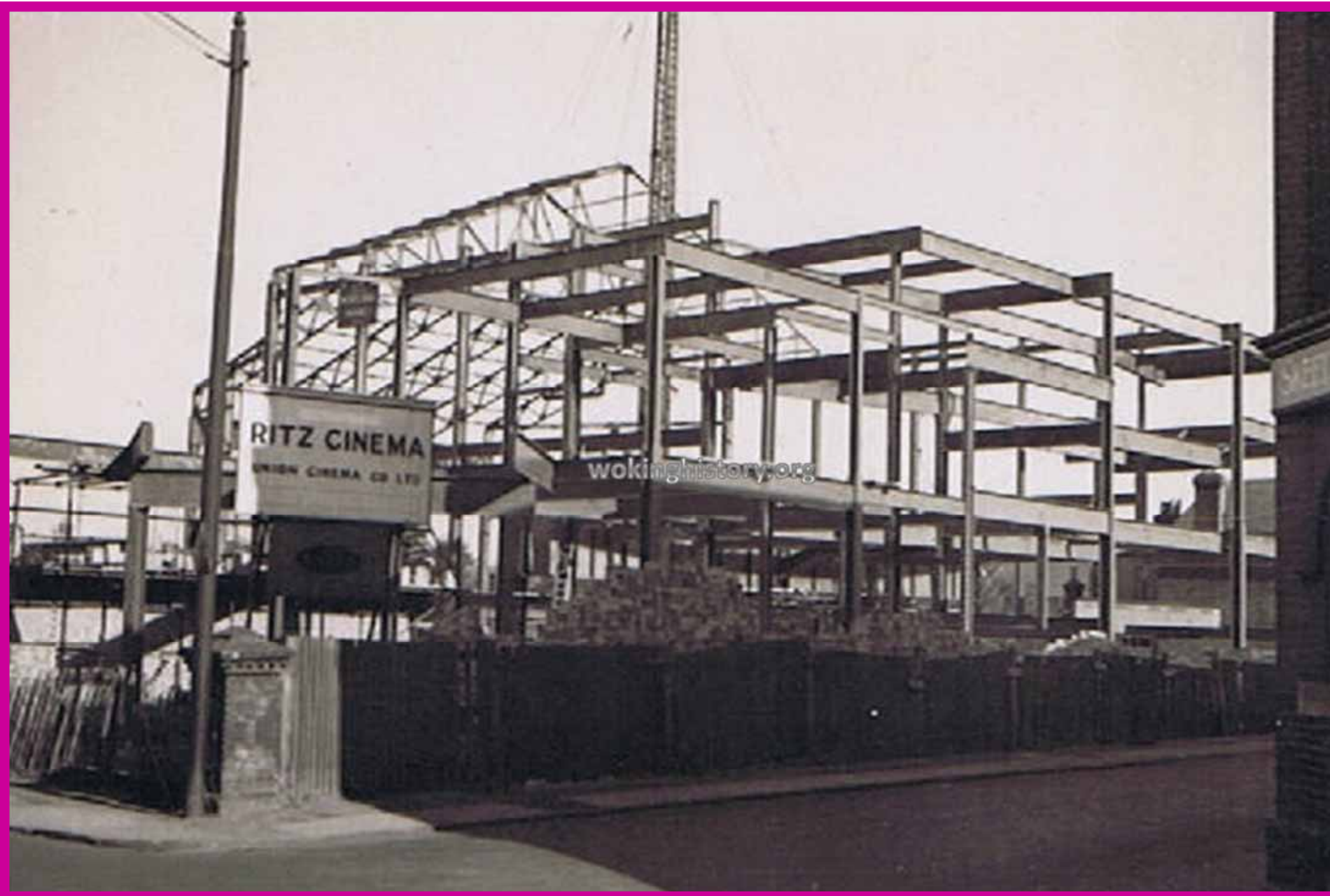
The Plaza in Chertsey Road (above) eventually became the Gaumont, whilst the Astoria in Duke Street (below) was later renamed the Odeon.











of the pit. The official opening was performed by local M.P., Godfrey Nicholson.

Billy Cotton and his band played in May that year and in June the 'Twenty-six Terry

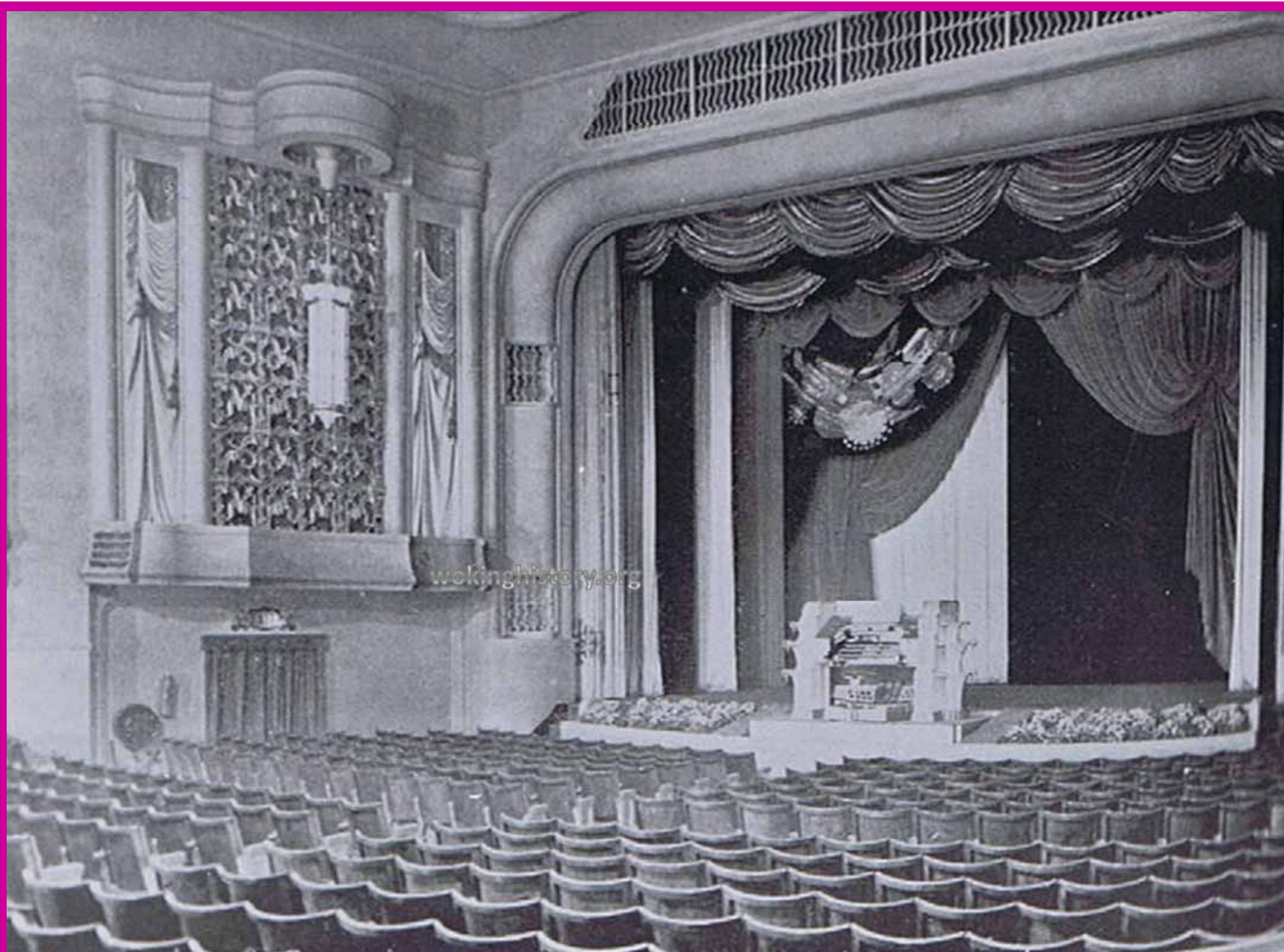
Juveniles' (Stars of Variety) appeared complete with 'baby Terry' to wow the audience – but it











seems that one of the main attractions of the Ritz was its restaurant. Cinema-goers could even indulge in 'Theatre Teas', consisting of 'dainty tea trays' including of a pot of tea, white and brown bread and butter, cake or a pastry', all served to the patrons in their seats for just 6d (3p) per person!

Union Cinemas only operated the Ritz for a few months before being taken over by Associated British Cinemas in October 1937 (although it would not be until 1962 that the name of the cinema was changed to the ABC). At that time they apparently controlled some 460 cinemas across the country, claiming to be the biggest cinema chain in the world – even though they had only been founded nine years earlier!

In the meantime, the Urban District of Woking could well have had another couple of cinemas as A & J Simmons had proposed to build a cinema along with the shops on their Hoe Bridge Estate in Old Woking (later to be named Rydens Way) and in July 1937 the council approved plans submitted by New Era Cinemas Ltd for a cinema on the northern side of the junction of the High Road and Oyster Lane in Byfleet (together with 'five lock-up shops and four shops with flats over').

Needless-to-say neither of these plans came to be built, which is a shame because with the 'art-deco' style being in fashion at the time, it is probable that we could have had two cinema gems in our villages (on the assumption that

unlike their town centre counterparts they wouldn't have been demolished by now)!

The Ritz was well-known for its upstairs restaurant and the organ that rose out of the pits.









# COMMERCIAL ROAD CAR PARK PLANS OF 1937



In 1936 the council agreed to purchase a number of properties in Commercial Road. The 'official' reason was to widen the road and create a new central car park, but it has been suggested that the officials of Woking Urban District Council may have had more ambitious plans. It is thought that they were thinking of creating a new shopping centre on the site – a very modern idea – but

one that would have been unpopular with a number of influential councillors. They were local businessmen in the town and feared any changes that could affect their personal income.

But the planners were playing the long game and knew their time would come. Unfortunately what they hadn't bargained for

was the Second World War and the building restrictions placed by the government immediately after. It wouldn't be until the 1970's before the planners dream of a proper shopping centre for the town was achieved, but in the meantime Commercial Road had it's car park – between the Atalanta Ballroom and Church Path.

## OWEN'S LADIES WEAR SALE, 8th JULY 1937

One shilling in old money (often written as 1/-) converted to five pence upon decimalisation in 1971. There were twelve old pennies in a shilling and twenty shillings in one pound. I can just about remember using the old currency and can still (with a little thought) add it all up – but my wife, who is just over eighteen months younger than me, was never taught '£.s.d.' at school, so still often asks when looking at old advertisements (such as this one for Owen's store in Commercial Road) 'how much was 4/11'?

My answer 'a penny short of five shillings' doesn't help, so I convert it to ½p less than 25p - 24½p for a 'reliable mac'. If only you could still get one for that price today!

Of course to a certain extent converting the old money into new is pointless unless you know what people were earning (and paying out for other things) as well – but I still find looking at the old advertisements fascinating – not least for the changes in fashion – some could easily be back in fashion again.

WE CLOSE at 6.30 p.m.  
Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays during Sale



**Celtex Frocks**  
Reduced from 6/11 to  
**5/6**

Buy Your  
Holiday Outfits  
at  
Reduced Prices

**Bargains Every Day!**

**OWEN'S  
LADIES' WEAR SALE**

[WokingHistory.org](http://WokingHistory.org)

**THURSDAY, JULY 8th, 1937**

**Reductions in Every Department**

HOSIERY  
UNDERWEAR  
CORSETS  
SHORTS  
WOOLS  
COATS

BATHING COSTUMES  
HOUSEMAIDS' WEAR  
KNITTED SUITS  
UMBRELLAS  
MACKINTOSHES  
ART NEEDLEWORK

COSTUMES  
OVERALLS  
JUMPERS  
CARDIGANS  
DRESSES  
APRONS

Ladies' Washing Frocks  
Sale price..... From 2/-  
Tweed Coats. Sale price..... From 12/11  
Hungarian Embroidered Silk Blouses  
Reduced to 7/11  
Sub-Standard Pure Silk Hose. Morley's make  
Original Price 2/11 Sale Price, Per pair 3/-  
Art. Silk Scarves..... From 1/-  
Oddments in Knitting Wool. Usually 7½d. oz.  
Sale price..... 4½d.  
Vest and Panties. Lace Stitch..... Set 1/11  
Fancy Wrapover Overall. Sale price..... 1/6  
Ladies' Art. Silk Frocks  
Sale price..... From 3/11 to 25/-  
Dressing Gowns in Art. Silk..... From 5/11  
Maid's Afternoon Art. Silk Frocks..... Reduced to 4/11  
Reliable Jumper Wool. Usually 7¼ lb.  
Sale price..... Per oz. 3½d.  
Pure Silk Hose (Seconds) originally 2/-  
Sale Price..... Per pair 1/6  
Table Runners, Chair Backs, Cushion Cases,  
etc., all much reduced

Art. Silk Sets :  
Slip, Vest and Knickers; trimmed  
Rosebud Net Original price 10/11  
Sale price..... Per Set 7/6  
Coat Overall in Plain Colours  
Originally 3/11..... 2/11  
Heavy Quality Crossover Overall. Usually 2/11  
Sale price..... 2/-  
Linen Costumes, Shorts, and Skirts all much  
reduced  
Tennis Jumpers and Cardigans  
Sale prices..... From 1/9 to 5/-  
Oddments in Ladies' Hose. Usually 1/11 to 2/11  
Sale price..... Per pair 1/-  
Art. Silk and Lisle Hose. Slightly Sub-Standard  
Usual Price 3/11 Sale price, per pair 2/9  
Art. Silk Nightdresses, reduced from 12/11  
Sale Price..... 6/11  
Open Top Princess Slips. Special Quality  
Sale price..... 1/11  
Art. Silk Pinafores..... Each 1/-  
All Gloves much reduced in price



**Reliable Macs**  
reduced to **4/11**

Be Sure  
to Come and See  
Our  
Sale Windows

**67-69 COMMERCIAL ROAD :: WOKING**