

Norman Godwin Remembers.....

Working at the Gaumont



The Gaumont in later life as a Night Club

Image from the RLHS archives.

As the Chief Projectionist, my main duty was organising the reels and preparing for set up on the projector. When techniques improved over time less reels were needed. We had to be on our toes to make sure the film flowed seamlessly. Our reels were sent from distribution centres around the country.

My day at The Gaumont started at 9:30am, after the final curtain I would leave about 11pm. To make the cinema work and enable the audience to enjoy their time several functions happened behind the scenes. A room for rewinding films, 2 big generators and a smaller generator, batteries in case of power failure, the bulbs & electrics storage room and a boiler room for heating using coke as fuel and, of course, our coffee break room.

The most popular films were screened three times daily, some running for two weeks. The capacity of The Gaumont was 813. the weekly programme was advertised in the main shops and The Redditch Indicator.

The Gaumont was one of Redditch's larger cinemas and in my opinion was the best. It did not have a balcony, the auditorium was a single sweep broken by the footway, this created a wonderful atmosphere. The high quality decor, chandeliers, wall lighting/features and comfortable seats all added to a quality entertainment experience. During the war years cinema provided excitement

Along with many young people of the time I left school, St Stephen's Boy's School Peakman Street, at 14 years old. I then began my working life in 1943.

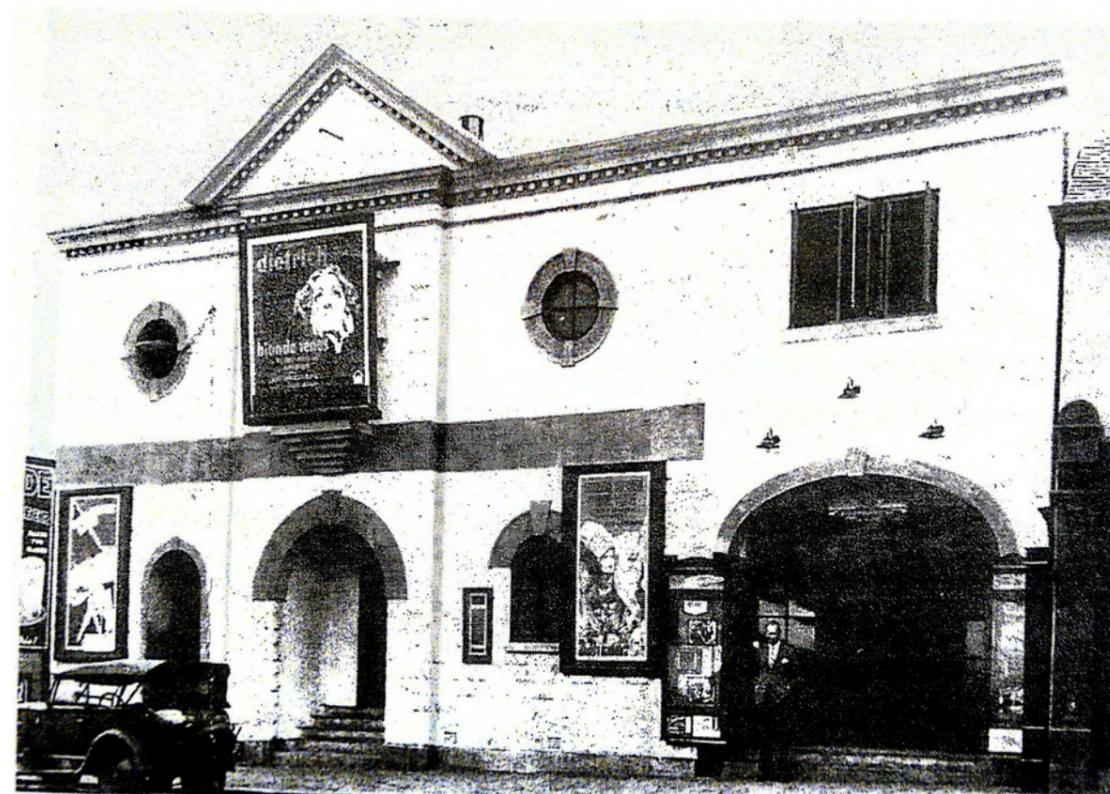
My Dad, John 'Jack' Godwin, was Master Baker at Webb's Bakers, Peakman Street. I helped in the bakery and especially enjoyed going out delivering bread and cakes to places such as Beoley and to farms in the area.

My Mum, Kate Godwin, did outwork also for Webb's and cleaning work at The Gaumont.

My first full time employment was at The Gaumont Cinema, Church Road. During the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s Redditch had several thriving cinemas. The Gaumont mostly screened films produced by 20th Century Fox, also British films and Horror films.

The Select or Regal (Alcester Street) mostly screened films from Warner Bros. Studios. The Palace (Alcester Street) was the first Redditch cinema to show 'Gone with the Wind'. The Danilo (Unicorn Hill) showed some films from 20th Century Fox but mostly from MGM Studios.

As well as enjoying the movies at The Gaumont, cinema goers were informed about national/international events through Gaumont British News and Universal Newsreels.



The "Select", this first purpose built cinema In Redditch

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and relief from air raids, gas masks, blackouts and rationing. The posters and lighting outside had to be blacked out, with cinema goers being warned that sirens may go off.

Some of my duties breached modern Health and Safety rules. Due to wearing and poorer quality older reels sometimes split so we had to hastily join them up again with our hands - risky and painful. The celluloid had inflammable properties, we once hurriedly dampened a small fire!

We also had to check and clean the lights one by one, having to get into very tricky positions such as with the 80 tiny lights at the back. The two chandeliers with all their lights needing to be cleaned were lowered with great care. No one wanted to be in their way should they come crashing down.

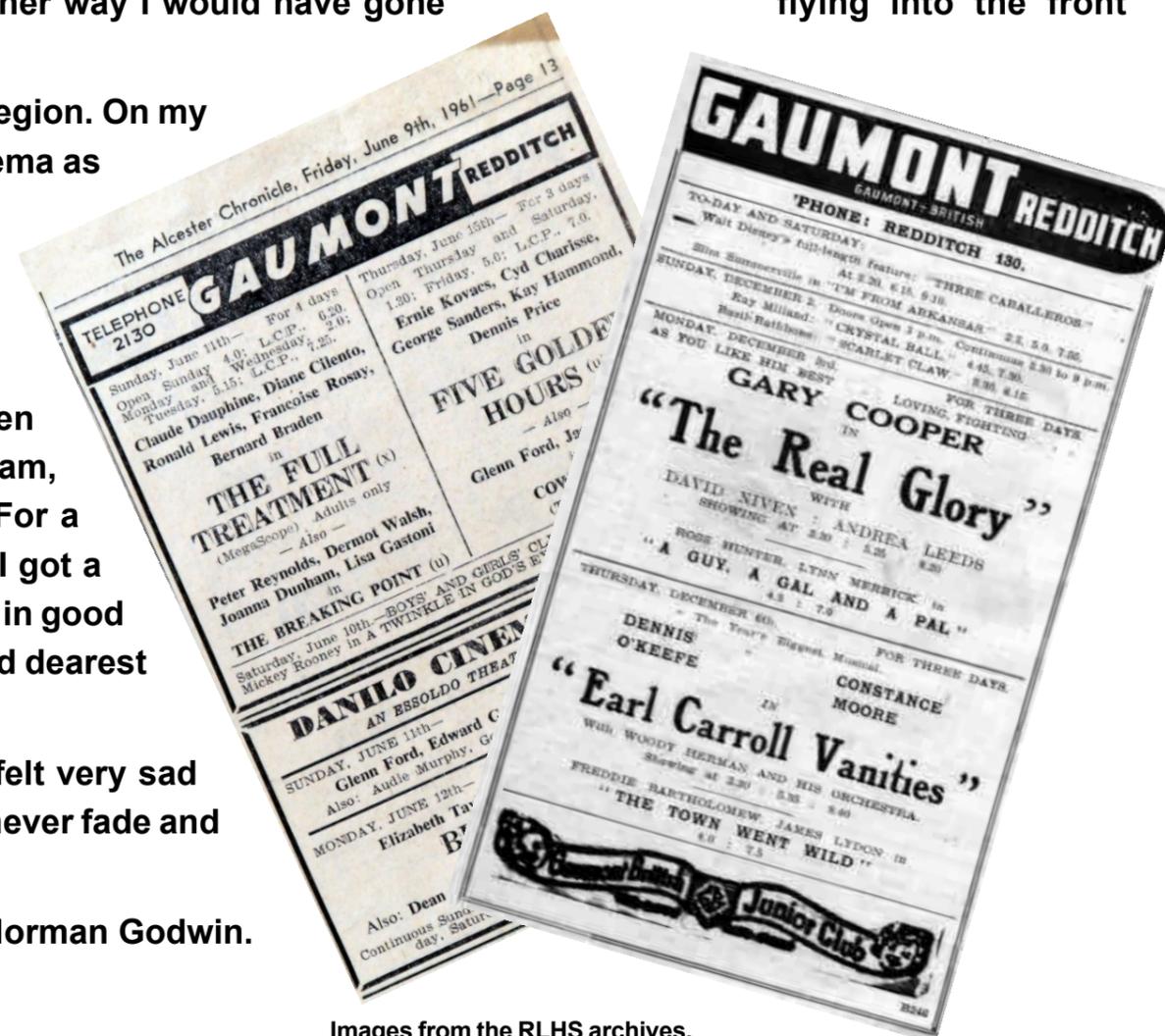
One of my tasks was to get up a ladder to grease the curtain wire and clean the lights above the screen and drapes. On one occasion the ladder slipped, becoming wedged in the corner. To an unsuspecting onlooker this might have appeared to be a Charlie Chaplin or Harold Lloyd stunt. I literally hugged the ladder, hanging on for dear life over 30 feet up as two rungs broke off at the top. Fortunately a colleague was there, the Chief Operator who yelled "don't move, don't look down". He helped me get back down to the ground - shaken and mighty relieved. If the ladder had slipped the other way I would have gone flying into the front seats.

A perk of the job was free admission to other cinemas in the region. On my day off I would go to Birmingham or Worcester and enjoy cinema as a customer. In Birmingham, I went to cinemas such as; the Odeon, Forum, Scala and Bristol Road/ABC. In Worcester I went to; the Odeon, Gaumont and Scala cinemas. The meals at the Gaumont Restaurant were absolutely brilliant.

From the projection room we had the task of lighting the screen and setting up spotlights. During the intermission ice cream, chocolates and soft drinks were available from usherettes. For a bit of fun I dropped a spotlight on to one of the usherettes. I got a stern finger-waving "don't do that again" afterwards. It was all in good part as she was the love of my life who became my nearest and dearest wife, Peggy.

When the building was reduced to rubble a few years ago I felt very sad but my many fabulous memories of working at The Gaumont never fade and last forever.

Norman Godwin.



Images from the RLHS archives.