

Bermondsey Street Back Stories

Number 7: The Trocette Cinema

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The cinema as seen from across Tower Bridge Road

A window into a world of glamour and fun

There was not much fun to be had in Bermondsey in the early 20th century. Working hours were long and life was hard. Housing was often poor and cramped, lacking comfort and convenience. Money was short. There was little left over for recreation – but the cinema was affordable, just, for many.

The golden age of cinema

The 1920s and 30s were the golden age of cinema. There were the opulent and lavishly decorated picture houses like the famous Trocadero at the Elephant and Castle and there

were smaller local cinemas like the Grand in Grange Road. They offered varied programmes, two features, a newsreel, perhaps a cartoon and sometimes live entertainment.



The Super when it first opened

The Super Cinema

A cinema was built on Tower Bridge Road for George Smart, next to a public house called the Horseshoe which formed part of the frontage. Originally called the Super it was designed in attractive Art Deco style by the famous cinema architect, George Coles in 1929. It had a Wurlitzer 2 Manual/8 Rank theatre organ which was played by Arthur Jenkins. The stage was 7 metres wide and 4 metres deep. There were five dressing rooms.

George Coles – famous architect of art deco cinemas

George Coles designed nearly 100 cinemas and several are now listed buildings including the Gaumont State in Kilburn and the Odeon in Muswell Hill. He was very clear what he was aiming for when he designed a cinema. As well as the sparkle of glamour, *‘the atmosphere, with the lights up, should be one of warmth and cosiness, rather than that of a cold vast structure.’*

The ‘Ice Box’

The Super soon acquired the nickname the ‘Ice Box’ and was taken over by the Hyams and Gale circuit in 1932, only a few years after opening. The Hyams brothers already owned the Trocadero cinema at Elephant & Castle. They commissioned George Coles to make improvements at The Super, including a new central heating system. The auditorium capacity was enlarged to 3000 and it was renamed the Trocette. Hyams and Gale were themselves taken over by Gaumont British, and the cinema was renamed the Troc-ette



Phil and Sid Hyams, cinema owners with George Coles, architect

The Show went on through World War 2

The cinema stayed open throughout the second world war, closing only briefly for one month in 1941 during the worst of the bombing. It was the source of many happy memories for adults and children alike. It hosted dance bands, skiffle concerts, singers, comedians and beauty competitions. The Saturday morning picture club was a popular attraction. For an outlay of 6d (5p), local kids could enjoy a film, a cartoon, a serial and join in a sing song accompanied by the Wurlitzer. If ready cash was not to hand, illicit entry (bunking in) by the side door was often arranged with the help of friends.

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A Trocette advertisement from the 1930s

A lively audience

The atmosphere was described as 'boisterous' by a former projectionist. If an audience did not like a film or worse still it broke down, they were quick to show their disapproval by shouting and stamping. Sometimes, a combination of London 'smog' and cigarette smoke – ashtrays were conveniently attached to the seats - made it difficult to see the screen. During trailers or advertisements, some of the audience went out for chips or a pint at the handy local pub. When the programme ended, the notorious cheaper wooden seats could be heard banging and crashing as the audience made for the exit. After the show, a keenly anticipated treat was a visit to the local bakers, famous for its hot sugar doughnuts or a trip to the Pie & Mash shop.

Part of the local community

There were other cinemas in the area but none so much part of the community as the Trocette. Sadly, by the 1950s, the great days of the cinema were coming to an end. An attempt to introduce 3D screenings for films such as 'Murder in the Rue Morgue' were not successful and audiences were diminishing. In an effort to save the ailing cinema, the manager launched a one man polling exercise. Knocking on doors in the area, he asked local residents what kind of films were popular and what could be done to make a visit to the cinema more attractive? To no avail and the Trocette closed in January 1956 with Jack Hawkins starring in *Touch and Go* and Victor Mature in *Veils of Bagdad*.



The remains of the Troc-ette during demolition

Demolition and a new use for the site

It was demolished in 1975 and the site eventually redeveloped in the 1990s. It is now the site of Trocette Mansions designed in flamboyant style in homage to the cinema it replaced.



Trocette Mansions, corner of Bermondsey Street and Tower Bridge Road