

THE MODERN CINEMA

1920s

The modern cinema arrived in Bury in the early 1920s. This new age was characterised by huge advances in film technology and film content and by investment in buildings on an unprecedented scale. The face of Bury cinema changed out of all recognition with the opening in 1924 and 1925 of two very large – at least for Bury – cinemas, the Central and the Playhouse. Big money had arrived, most of it from outside the town. As a downside, it meant the end of traditional theatre; the long-struggling Theatre Royal closed its doors in May 1925.⁷⁶

The End of the New Empire

Until 1924, the New Empire had the field to itself, although one senses it never threw off its wartime shackles and experienced again the good old pre-war days. Perhaps the aftershock of war and the loss of cinema-going habits took their toll, although seat prices at 4d, 6d, 8d and 1s do not seem to have been excessive. Its traditional structure of two programmes a night, six nights a week, with a film change on Thursdays, quickly resumed; but gone for ever were the turns. The main film – by now very often a Charlie Chaplin – was shown, often alone, on the first nights of the week, while the last nights were relegated to a serial – first introduced in wartime – supported by short comedy films. As in wartime, these serials went on and on and surely descended into something pedestrian; in mid-May 1922, for example, *The Lion Man* concluded at episode 18. For whatever reason, the New Empire seems to have lost its way and the new Central Cinema and the Playhouse would soon overshadow it.⁷⁷

Walter Cook of the New Empire and sometime of the Theatre Royal surely saw the writing on the wall, for in or around 1924 he joined forces with Mr Douglas F Bostock and, probably under the latter's leadership, formed the Playhouse Co (Bury St Edmunds) Ltd. This corporate manoeuvre included purchasing the New Empire in mid-1925 and building a new luxury cinema/theatre called the Playhouse, but more on this later. For a while the two cinemas were run together, apparently with 'much success' according to Mr Bostock, until in January 1926 the Empire burnt down.⁷⁸

A lighted cigarette left by a patron caused the blaze, which was discovered in the early hours. The fire was visible 'for miles around', with the flames leaping above the telegraph wires. Boxes of highly inflammable films exploded, the roof collapsed at 6am, and absolutely nothing was saved. A few weeks later most of the site was sold to the Post Office, and so ended the venerable New Empire. It deserved better, but it must be admitted that in its old age it had turned into something of a down-market white elephant or, to use a term of the cinema, a 'fleapit'. With the Playhouse up and running and drawing the crowds, the question had been what to do with it and its cramped site. Selling was probably not desirable in case it fell into the hands of a competitor. Demolition may have been an option, but in the event was made unnecessary by the fire.



The New Empire's programme in 1925 before its destruction by fire. The main feature that week, shown for three days, was *The Merry-Go-Round*, the 'sweetest love story ever', offered with the bold promise of a full refund 'if you are not satisfied'.

Bury Free Press, January 1925



Four cast members and a lion walk into the spider's web. The lion looks the least impressed. This US poster for *The Lion Man* (1919) gives a taste of what was on offer – for 18 episodes.

Universal Features

This fire raised some Bury eyebrows. While its cause was not unreasonable, as smoking and cinema-going had become synonymous as well as notorious, it has to be said that sixty years later one informed commentator reckoned that 'most people' believed it 'was no accident'.⁷⁹



The end of the New Empire, 1926. Fire broke out in the early hours of Thursday 7 January, probably as a result of a cigarette dropped by a patron, following the final performance of *Thorns of Passion* – 'a thousand thrills in this mighty drama'. It was rather upstaged by reality; a poster advertising the evening's programme appears to be the only item to have survived.

Bury Free Press, January 1926

The Central Cinema

The Central Cinema, which carries on today as the Abbeygate, opened slightly ahead of the Playhouse. This luxury cinema was based on its namesake in Cambridge and was managed by the same people; no Bury money was invested in it. The townspeople of Bury had seen nothing like it before.⁸⁰

These Cambridgeshire entrepreneurs in 1924 formed a syndicate of 30 investors organised as the Central Cinema (Bury St Edmunds) Ltd, funded by £10,000 in equity and promoted by Peter J C Scarlato, its managing director. His co-directors were Percy V Wallis, a solicitor, and Percy G Reynolds, a butcher, while the other leading investor was one Frederick Winton Smith, a provisions manufacturer. In most cases these investors were drawn from the Cambridgeshire food trades and would presumably have been personally known to the promoters (See Appendix 3 for details of the syndicate). Sidney Frank, formerly the popular manager and part-owner of the New Empire, who had left Bury in 1914, returned as manager to provide these distant investors with local knowledge.⁸¹

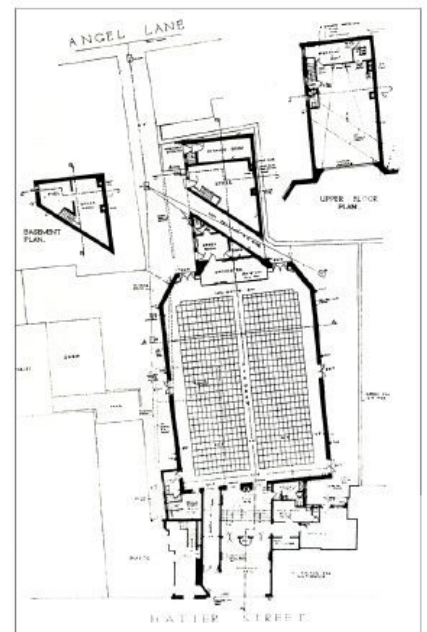
The first news of the Central project broke in May 1924 and thereafter building advanced at breakneck speed. The investment syndicate behind it was put together between June and September and the cinema opened to the public on 4 November. Located at York House in Hatter Street, to which the freehold was acquired, it was in a side street but close to the town's main shopping hub. Its function was well disguised, the cinema being constructed within the profile of an existing row of eighteenth-century houses and with a façade hardly resembling that of a modern cinema. And it wasn't unduly large, its 650 seats being not far above the average for Suffolk at this time (See Appendix 6). The auditorium, built of fletton brick and roofed with corrugated sheeting, rose above the medieval streets that skirted it. Viewed from the front, it was out of sight; viewed from the back, it was certainly not Bury's most handsome building, but there was no mistaking the luxury of the interior. The *Free Press* positively drooled over it.⁸²

On 3 November, Bury's elite – 'a representative gathering' – assembled for a 'special invitation performance'. A portrait of the King was displayed; the national anthem was sung; the whole programme was shown; an appeal was made at the interval in aid of ex-servicemen; cigars, cigarettes and chocolates were distributed. The Central had arrived. 'We have three ideals', pronounced Mr Scarlato as he set out his agenda and distanced the Central from the New Empire. 'The first is the comfort of our patrons, the second is good films, and the third is good music. We have no room for the blood and thunder, wildly improbable farcicalities [sic] which are often filmed. We shall give films with a story of dramatic interest and a vein of natural humanity running through it, pictures which are amusing, interesting, educational and which leave no nasty memory: and there will be plenty of good, clean, sound humour. So far as music is concerned, I hold that good music is coequally with good films the dominant attraction of a picture theatre. But it must be good and to ensure that we have engaged



Hatter Street prior to the construction of the Central Cinema. The yellow-highlighted building to the left of the one-storey building was adapted, but the scale and integrity of the street as a whole was maintained. The façade was remodelled, or perhaps taken down and rebuilt entirely. The bulky, utilitarian auditorium, built from fletton brick, was not visible from the street.

Pat Church



The front elevation and plan from the 1924 architectural plans of the Central Cinema in Hatter Street. It continues, although much altered inside, as the Abbeygate.

The Builder, vol.127, 1925, p.775



The façade of the Central, photographed shortly after the cinema's opening. It was so well known that its management felt no need to display a sign. The posters on the first floor appear to be illuminated by floodlights.

Moyses's Hall Museum (Suffolk Archives, HD 1376/6)



The interior of the Central Cinema upon its opening in 1924. It was the very essence of luxury, and Bury had seen nothing like it before. The seating was identical throughout the cinema; it was location alone that determined the price of a seat – something that was, in all likelihood, unprecedented in Bury.

Moyses's Hall Museum (Suffolk Archives, HD 1376/6)

a full London orchestra'. And in another gesture to sophistication, the Central was to sell throughout performances 'sundaes, delicious cream ices and ice drinks'.⁸³

'With a handsome, brilliantly lighted frontage and entrance hall, nicely decorated and adorned with palms and which add lustre and dignity to the surroundings, the cinema is capable of seating 650 people and is furnished, decorated and constructed throughout with an eye to safety, comfort and good taste. All danger is brought to what is virtually an irreducible minimum. The comfort of patrons has been raised to a fine art. All the chairs have deep, well-sprung, tip-up seats and are upholstered in rich corded velvet with the floor covered with a thick pile carpet. The roof and walls are artistically decorated in biscuit and gold, with red wainscoting, and crimson silk-shaded electrics suffuse the entire theatre with a warm, subdued glow, the general effect being of spaciousness and soft colour. The entrances from the vestibule into the theatre are heavily curtained to ensure that the auditorium is practically draught proof, while the stuffiness which is the feature of many picture theatres has been completely overcome by the introduction of a new system of heating and ventilation . . . In addition, the floor is substantially sloped so that all can see comfortably, and eye strain and stiff necks are obviated'.

'An outstanding feature of this super-picture theatre is the ingenious system of film projection', the *Free Press* went on. 'In many cinemas the audience is continually subjected to the annoyance of hearing a buzzing "projector" at its back which throws the pictures on the screen from the rear of the theatre. Consequently, one's enjoyment of the picture and the resultant train of thought are completely spoiled by the incessant humming and clicking of the machine a few feet behind. Added to this, darkness, which is essential to the perfect presentation of a film, is never gained, and often gases from the 'projector' add to the discomfort. At the Central, all is very different. In the first place all rays of light are excluded from the body of the theatre, together with all smoke and smell. This development adds inestimably to one's enjoyment and incidentally to the clarity of the picture. The screen is specially prepared and is of the latest pattern and when not in use is covered by a sliding curtain of purple silk composition with gold embroidery. The generator is noiseless . . .'⁸⁴

Mr Scarlato sought a high-class crowd and the money that came with it, something confirmed by his pricing structure. Tickets cost 6d, 9d, 1s 3d, 1s 10d, with children admitted at slightly more than half price above the 6d minimum. By contrast, in May 1925 the New Empire was charging 4d, 6d, 8d and 1s with those under twelve admitted at half price. Of course, it's not known what 6d bought at the Central and what 4d bought at the Empire nor is it known how many seats were available at what prices, but it is very hard not to think that the Central aimed to sweep up the bigger spenders to the detriment of the Empire and to attract middle-class – i.e. 'high-class' – newcomers. The Central's pricing was based on seat position alone, as there was only one seat type; the Empire's was linked to a combination of position and type – in 1911 the latter were: 'seats', 'upholstered', 'tip-ups', 'plush tip-ups' and 'armchairs'. The Central maintained this seat pricing throughout the 1920s.⁸⁵

The Playhouse

Within days of the Central opening, rumours of the construction of another cinema swirled around Bury and were repeated in the *Free Press*, which questioned whether three cinemas would be commercially viable, but satisfied itself that ‘other towns, not larger than Bury ..., have at least three public places of entertainment’. Within eight months, the Playhouse had opened. Here again, nothing was spared in its luxury and, as with the Central, its opening by the Mayor in July 1925 was quite a talking point. Its location in the Buttermarket, on the site of the former Half Moon Hotel, meant that it was more central than the Central. But in many respects its concept was quite different and far more ambitious. The Playhouse was as much a theatre as a cinema, and planned for plays and comedies, especially in the winter months. Besides this, it came with a café, a lounge, the Playhouse Bar and a billiards room. In other words, it was a rounded entertainment centre in which the individual parts worked together – in the daytime, for example, the orchestra serenaded the café patrons; in the evening the Playhouse Bar also provided the interval drinks for the cinema. ‘Tea and supper parties’ were catered for ‘after the show’.⁸⁶



The front of the Playhouse upon its opening in 1925. The building sat comfortably within Bury's Buttermarket. The iron and glass canopy straddled the pavement and lent the building considerable presence, while also advertising the Playhouse's lounge and café. A bar and billiards room completed what was, in effect, a fully appointed entertainment centre.

Bury Free Press (Suffolk Archives, K730)

All of this laid down quite a challenge to the Central in chasing those ‘high-class’ patrons where all the money was to be found. For one thing the Playhouse was very central while the Central itself was to be found down a side street. For another, its look and feel were more upmarket. At its entrance on the Buttermarket, a wrought-iron and coloured-glass canopy straddled the pavement, and it paid the Council a rental so that on market



The auditorium of the Playhouse upon its opening in 1925. It was equipped with a balcony, perhaps necessary because its site was relatively small given all the facilities it offered or to offer an ‘exclusive’ area to those willing to pay a bit more. The deep stage shows that it was well equipped to host live performances.

Moyse's Hall Museum (Suffolk Archives, HD 1376/7)

NEW PLAYHOUSE FOR BURY.

Butter Market Theatre Ready by Easter.

Details of an Ambitious Scheme.

Almost before the paint was dry at the Central Cinema, competition was on the way – in the form of the Playhouse, which had grand ideas about what a cinema should be.

Bury Free Press, 10 January 1925



The programme for the first week of the Playhouse in July 1925, which centred on a formal opening by the Mayor. The acclaimed film *Scaramouche* played all week. Released in 1923, this silent film, set amid the turmoil of the French Revolution, was as swashbuckling as it was romantic, and starred Ramon Novarro playing opposite Alice Terry. It was accompanied by the Playhouse's 'full orchestra', provided to accompany the film in the absence of a recorded soundtrack.

Bury Free Press, July 1925



A lobby card, likely the US version, used to advertise the film *Scaramouche*, 1923

Metro Pictures

days no stalls were pitched outside its doors. Its combination of theatre and cinema was attractive to a middle-class audience, while its hosting of the annual production of the Bury Amateur Operatic & Dramatic Society won it friends in the right places. In a word of the early century, it sought to be 'toney' [sic] and succeeded in being so.

As a cinema/theatre, it had a 'balcony' or circle, perhaps incorporated to accommodate a large audience on what was a relatively small site given all the facilities it provided. Or perhaps it was an opportunity to add a little exclusivity to those willing to pay a bit more. The *Free Press* found it 'decorated and furnished in delightful style', enhanced by the lighting and with 'carpet of Wilton pile and curtains of Lister velvet'. It was 'practically fireproof' and had 'heaps of exits' and presented a picture of 'all that is elegant and comfortable'. Regular seat prices were 6d, 9d, 1s 2d, 1s 6d and 2s, very broadly in line with those of the Central, but way ahead of the Empire.⁸⁷

The Playhouse Co (Bury St Edmunds) Ltd, formed to build it, was led by three directors, but their source of finance has not been discovered. One was Mr Arthur Wood, 'a well-known local resident' cum 'dealer in property', who owned many buildings in central Bury, including in the Buttermarket. The second was the ever 'popular' Walter Cook, formerly of the New Empire and Theatre Royal; he brought with him his manager, Mr Jennings. The third director was altogether more interesting and doubtless the project's engine.⁸⁸

He was Mr Douglas Bostock of Ipswich, who was starting to build an extensive cinema circuit in Suffolk, Norfolk and north Essex. His family from the late nineteenth century had developed entertainment interests across East Anglia. In 1909, a James Bostock of London, perhaps Douglas's uncle, established roller-skating in Bury's Corn Exchange, while his father, Edward Henry Bostock of Glasgow, who died in 1940, by 1910 owned, somewhat oddly, the Hippodromes at Norwich and Ipswich as well as other cinemas at Paisley and Hamilton. Not for nothing did the *Free Press* say that Douglas's name was 'synonymous with that of the theatre'.

By the 1920s, while somehow involved with his father's Hippodrome at Ipswich, he started the Playhouse at Bury, where Frederick Graves was to be his right-hand man, and went on to create what came to be known as the Bostock Circuit. By 1940 it had twenty sites, which must have provided considerable market power, especially in film renting. More influence was acquired through his chairmanship, from 1938 onwards, of the Eastern Counties Branch of the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association (CEA) of 63 businesses operating 83 cinemas. Also, Mr Bostock was reckoned by some to be on the ruthless side in building his business.⁸⁹

The Playhouse provided Bury with a further 750 cinema seats, so that almost overnight the town's provision – 600 seats at the New Empire and 650 at the Central – leapt to 2,000, even taking into account the permanent closure of the Theatre Royal in April 1925. Despite steadily, if not vigorously, rising demand, surely Bury was now substantially over-catered for, and it raises the question of why the Playhouse, with knowledge of the Central's plans, had proceeded with its investment or, at least, had done so with such immediacy. The decision was certainly a bold one.

THE BOSTOCK CIRCUIT

This circuit was built by Douglas Bostock, c.1886–1963, and covered Norfolk, Suffolk and north Essex. His first project involved the construction of Bury's Playhouse and the acquisition of the town's New Empire Cinema in 1924–25. By the early 1930s he had seven sites, two in Bury, two in Dovercourt and one each in Harwich, Haverhill and St Ives. In the 1930s, he accumulated more through acquisition or new-build, and by the outbreak of war the number peaked at twenty. By then, in terms of sites, the Bostock Circuit was the largest in East Anglia. It favoured small market towns or seaside towns in which it had a monopoly, sometimes operating two or more cinemas simultaneously. Generally, the Bostock cinemas were on the small side. In the late 1940s, decline set in, and the number of sites diminished to 19 by 1948, to 12 by 1953, to 5 by 1964. Among the first sold was the Playhouse in 1952. A feature of the circuit's operation was the inclusion of independent cinemas within its film renting constituency, which gave it additional leverage with film suppliers.



The Playhouse differed from the Central, which had opened the year before, by including a café, lounge, bar and billiard room. To borrow a modern term, it was intended to be an entertainment centre as much as a cinema and, as this illustration of its café confirms, it sought 'high-class' patrons prepared to pay a premium.

Bury Free Press (Suffolk Archives, K730)

Consolidation

The Playhouse clearly fancied its chances against the Central – and others evidently agreed: as early as February 1925 the Central felt compelled to issue a notice denying rumours that it was up for sale. Those rumours, it turned out, were well-founded. After what must have been an attritional four-year struggle, the Playhouse finally purchased the Central in 1929, and by July, Central Cinema (Bury St Edmunds) Ltd had gone into liquidation.

The background to the deal remains obscure: no relevant corporate records appear to have survived, and the contemporary press seems to be silent on the matter. Negotiations may have been brought to a head in late 1928, with the leaking that Bostock had acquired a site in the Buttermarket – vacant since it was destroyed in a Zeppelin raid during the First World War – with plans to build on it a replacement for the New Empire.

The agreed sale price is unknown, though it appears that the Central's investors did not emerge from the winding-up process empty-handed. Bleak as their position was, they held at least one useful card: the threat of their first-class hall passing to a capable competitor at a knock-down price, with all the damaging competition that would have meant for the Bostocks.⁹⁰



A joint programme of 'Attractions for November 1939' for the Playhouse and Central cinemas, then under common ownership and management.

Pat Church

It is a matter of speculation as to what, if anything, went wrong at the Central, because no details of profits or dividends have survived. But one senses that the Bostocks were keen competitors – Douglas was after all reckoned to be ruthless – and enjoyed several advantages. For one thing, his family possessed years of experience in the entertainment industry in which it had excelled; it gave them both knowledge and networks. They were a much bigger outfit, and this gave them muscle, especially in film renting. They planned the Playhouse on an ambitious scale with multiple functions and an upmarket presence to attract those highly valued, freer-spending middle-class patrons. On the other hand, the Central Circuit, with its three houses at Cambridge, Bury and Stamford, was much smaller and surely would not have had the same clout, notably in film renting. More to the point, the expertise of its board and investors lay in the Cambridgeshire provision and motor trades, and not in the national cinema industry. This, however, is speculation.

In the event, the Playhouse's acquisition seems to have paid off at least in the short term. It gave Bostock a monopoly in Bury, and in late 1930 he was able to increase marginally the Central's seat prices to between 6d and 2s from 6d and 1s 10d, the same as those at the Playhouse (See Appendix 8). When in 1937 the Odeon super-cinema opened in Bury and broke the monopoly, the Playhouse and Central must have been adversely affected. Certainly, plans published in 1935 to insert a balcony into the Central were aborted, while by the 1940s it might have been forced downmarket as its future manager, Mr Hugh Berry, who joined in 1939, recalled it as 'a proper dive ... known affectionately as the fleapit. It was scruffy and dowdy'.⁹¹

The optimism in 1925 upon which the Playhouse investment was based underlines the growing popularity of the cinema. In the last few years it had come a long way in terms of technology and content. Films were now much longer, more stable, clearer, had a story to tell and film stars to tell it. Bury's mayor, himself a regular patron, said it all on the opening evening at the Playhouse. 'It is about thirty years ago since I first witnessed a kinema picture', he began, 'and in those days a visit to a cinema was not a thing of beauty or a joy. The pictures were of a very sensational character and badly put on, with a motion so rapid that it was almost impossible to follow them, and the general effect was somewhat similar to an attack of seasickness. Nowadays, that is all past and done with, and, as a result of these crude efforts of the pioneers of the film, we have today the finished article'. Well, things were clearly vastly improved but the product was still far from being a finished one. The 'talkies' had yet to arrive in Bury, but they were on their way.⁹²