



Balwyn Historical Society

October 2023

Newsletter – October 2023

Coming Meeting this Thursday 12th October 7:30PM

Guest Speaker: Helen Penrose

Torchbearers - A Century History of Carey Grammar School

**at the
Balwyn Evergreen Centre,
45 Talbot Avenue, Balwyn**

Visitors welcome, please invite your Friends and Neighbours

Next Meeting Thursday 9th November 7:30 PM

Followed by a Festive Supper.

Guest Speaker: Barry Pemberton

Topic: Connie Christie - a Balwyn resident, her life and work as an author, and illustrator of the most beautiful children's books for Specialty Press, as well as advertising graphic designs for G J Coles, all hand drawn and produced.

This Publication includes the presentations of our guest speakers of the past few months: John Caveden - The Melbourne Observatory and Astronomy, Lisa Ricketts - the history of the Balwyn Palace Cinema. Again, some wonderful presentations enjoyed by those present.

June meeting: Guest Speaker - John Caveden

The Melbourne Observatory and Astronomy

Topic: The Melbourne Observatory and Astronomy – Yesterday, today and tomorrow. The first Observatory was in Williamstown in 1853 which was also a Naval depot but not entirely a satisfactory establishment for the future. Williamstown had two rooms, a telegraph office, and an observatory transit room for looking at the stars. A structure with a time ball assisted ships captains. The time ball was raised just before 1 PM and then dropped at precisely 1 PM. Institutions in London like Greenwich were emulated and copied. Notable academics became involved and early calibrations of the stars were connected to telegraphic clocks.

Robert Ellery (1827- 1908), a medico in England initially settled in Williamstown and was from 1853 the first Government astronomer for 42 years until 1895. He was a Fellow of and President of the Royal Society for 20 years, treasurer of Melbourne University Council, Chairman of the Austin Hospital and Trustee of the Public Library. He was also Captain of the Torpedo and Signalling Corps. His historical books can still be found in the Public Library especially the Star Atlas of 1750 (only one of 30 copies printed). This Atlas is quite a work of art.

Between 1857 and 1863, the Flagstaff observatory (on Flagstaff Hill) was also set up by Georg Von Neumeyer , a professor of Physics at Hamburg University. This observatory was funded by the German community. An assistant was William John Wills of Burke and Wills fame. (it was his knowledge of magnetic fields, astronomy and studies in surveying that led to his involvement in that ill-fated expedition).

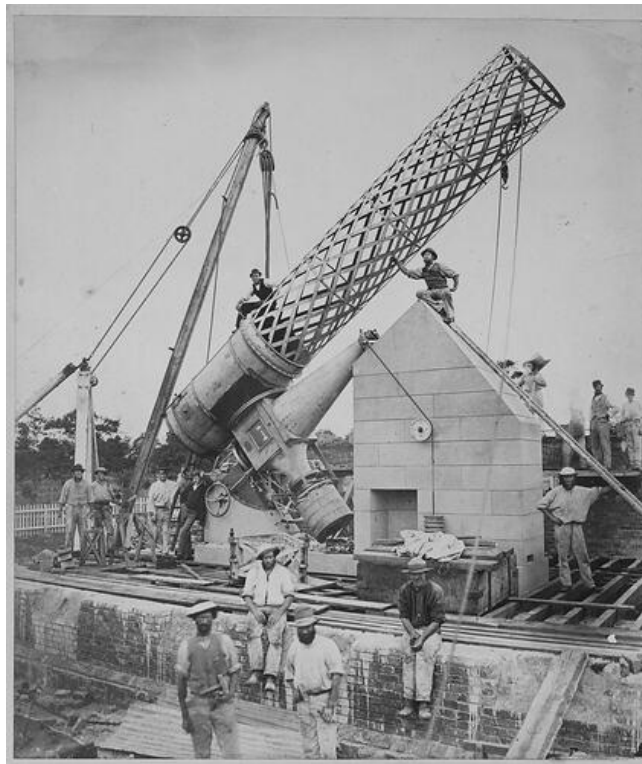
A good reason to support a move to the Domain site was that as Williamstown became more built-up tall structures as well as the lighthouses were a hindrance to the observatory's readings.



Thus, the Melbourne Observatory began its work in 1863 and continued the role of Maritime timekeeping services especially for Longitude calculations. (Latitude was easy).

Synchronisation of chronometers was needed for longitude and provided accurate local time. Initial instruments were a sextant, an artificial horizon and a marine chronometer and next was added a 30-inch transit instrument. Astronomically, the Melbourne observatory was important as there was only one other in the Southern hemisphere in South Africa. Knowledge of earth's magnetic fields were very significant for Antarctic expeditions in this part of the world. As well, once the observatory was considered a government body, it had to justify its existence.

During Ellery's time, The Great Melbourne Telescope was built in Dublin in 1868 by Thomas Grubb. It was a massive 48-inch telescope for its time and was assembled, tested, and disassembled before being shipped for arrival in 1869. Initially it was known as the Great Southern Telescope. It was a revolutionary design as it moved as the night sky moved removing any need for adjustments. Melbourne paid 5000 Pounds for it.



On Ellery's retirement, in 1895, Pietro Barachi became the acting head astronomer. He was a civil engineer from Florence who had set sail from Italy to New Zealand with his friends, Carlo Catani, Fernando Gagliardi and Ettore Cherrochi all of whom were to make their mark in other ways. Melbourne called as their destination.

Not only in his official work as an astronomer, Barachi was a weather prophet and forecaster to the rich and famous! Apparently, Dame Nellie Melba wrote to him in 1908. Before photography, drawings were created of what was seen through telescopes. As the Melbourne observatory was next to Government House, the governor would even bring guests to look at the moon. Barachi attempted to get lithographs published for the world but there were no funds for such an enterprise.

However, Joseph Turner a Scottish born photographer and observer with GMT arrived in Melbourne at the age of 27 and was making sundials but a greater success was to set up a photographic studio. His photos included a wonderful sharp, clear outline of the moon whose impact craters had first been thought to be a volcanic condition. Barachi discovered 57 new objects during his tenure as Astronomer for the observatory.



The observatory itself put Melbourne on the map. Royalty, Prince Albert and Prince George visited it during tours of other notable buildings. Carte du Ciel, a worldwide project in the C19th reported that Melbourne measured 392,615 stars. Many women were involved in this task. They were required to be at least 24 years of age and measuring and writing was done in pairs. One such measurement was the transit of the planet Venus, by discovering how long it took for Venus to cross the face of the sun to learn its distance from Earth. Much of this kind of work is still routine today completed as recent as 2002 and 2004 this century. Comets, sunspots, and eclipses are also part of the work. To have had the angle of the sun's ray on "Greater love hath no man" at the Shrine of Remembrance on November 11th at 11am, took a lot of calculation. Of course, the move to daylight savings affected the original calculation.

The Observatory closed in 1944. The telescope became obsolete, some of its parts were sold for scrap metal and others kept at Mt Stromlo were destroyed by bush fire in the 1950s. However, surviving parts were returned to Melbourne in 2013 for restoration guided by the Burra Charter (involves heritage conservation practice in Australia). The chief astronomer from Coonabarabran has led the restoration.

Next time we gaze into the night sky and marvel at the Milky Way and other celestial objects, we can reflect on those early astronomers who scoured the night skies over Melbourne and assisted Captains to keep ships and their crews on course.

August meeting: Guest Speaker - Lisa Ricketts

The History of the Palace Cinema Balwyn.

Lisa is the Palace Cinemas PR Manager and National Festivals Marketing Manager and we would like to thank her for the following story and pictures about The Palace Cinema in Whitehorse Rd Balwyn which is very much part of our local past history and our current place of entertainment.



Early days – introduction

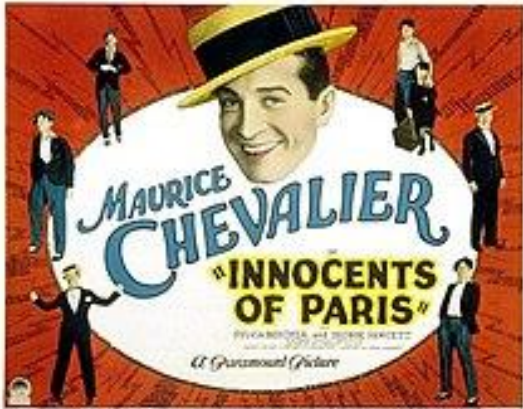
- The Palace Balwyn Cinema is a local institution, entertaining multiple generations within its Art Deco interior and is still located at the original address - 231 Whitehorse Road, Balwyn.
- The Time Theatre which opened in 1941 at 449 Whitehorse Rd, Balwyn was demolished in 1963 and is now a Shell service station.
- G. Apted and William McDonald designed the theatre, originally a single screen. Palace Balwyn opened on January 4, 1930, with a capacity of 1,800 in the stalls and circle.
- It has gone through several owners and several name changes: Balwyn Classic Cinema and in the 1960's to 1980's the Balwyn International Cinema.

Creating a cinema

- There are records to suggest that as early as 1923, there was an attempt to establish a theatre.
 - The original Neo-Classical design plans for Palace Balwyn were drawn up in 1927 but the cinema didn't open until 1930. Part of expansionist plans of the Edmonds brothers who already owned theatres.
 - Various planning requests were submitted and rejected, so proprietors took it into their own hands.
- *On 28th October 1927 it was noted "that the proprietors of the Balwyn Picture Theatre be notified that they are infringing the council's by-law by proceeding with the foundations of a picture theatre within a residential area, and if such action is continued proceedings will be taken to enforce the law."
- The council relented in 1928, agreeing on a tentative subdivision of land, building commenced in 1929.

Opening of cinema

- Finally, on 4th January 1930 the Balwyn Theatre opened with a gala occasion for those fortunate enough to get tickets.
- It had seating for 852 patrons in stalls & 626 in the dress circle for the Edmond Bros exhibitors of Preston & other suburban theatres.
- The first film that played was *Innocents of Paris* starring Maurice Chevalier.



- During the 1930s and into the 1940s live entertainment was provided before the show and during the interval on Saturday nights. Paul Jeacle and his jazz band performed at times and some local musicians were given the opportunity to show their talents on stage.
- In July 1941, alterations to staircases and construction of mezzanine floor and toilets took place.

Off Screen Drama!

• The fire of 1930 – as told by the Box Hill Reporter, June 27th, 1930

Mr. Burley was peacefully sleeping at his residence in Whitehorse Road, Balwyn, on Friday morning, but soon after 3 o'clock his slumbers were disturbed by a bright light shining through the bedroom window. On getting up to see the cause, he was surprised to see flames issuing through the roof of the Balwyn Picture Theatre.

The alarm was given, and in a few minutes the Box Hill and Surrey Hills brigades were on the spot and had the fire extinguished before it spread into the body of the hall.

Subsequent investigations into the cause revealed the fact that the side doors had been forced, and the manager's office ransacked. The value of the booty was only about £3, and it is thought that the thieves fired the curtain in chagrin.

Fortunately, the theatre is well equipped with up-to-date fire prevention devices. One of these is a device whereby certain cotton cords attached to the screen burn through and release an attachment leading to the roof; this causes any flames to be drawn upwards through a chimney flue. However, the screen, curtains, talking gear and drapery on the stage were destroyed, the total damage being about £1,000. The front curtain alone was valued at £330. The work by the brigades was of the highest order; they were promptly on the spot and so neatly did their work that no damage was done by water, and when it was over it would have been difficult to tell that a brigade had been operating.

Off Screen Drama continued!

- The break in of 1947, this time the police getting there in good time. A gunshot pursuit in and around the theatre, with one man arrested in the downstairs stalls.
- They had put gelignite in the keyhole of the theatre safe and clearly planned an explosive entry. Four were arrested the same day, and a fifth a few days later in a street incident. He later died in hospital, though not from gunshot wounds – it was his barefoot escape from the Balwyn Theatre, contracting tetanus from a cut in the foot.



- An armed gang stole money from a cash till at the theatre in 1953, so news of gangs around Melbourne is nothing new.
- In November 2007, a truck went through the front window of the cinema café. Nobody was injured, thankfully!

1940s to 50s

- War footage and the newsreels; war time was a means to escape 'Going to the Pictures'.
- Pre-show – cartoon, serial and then the film. Featurettes included Fitzpatrick's Travel Talks, Pete Smith Novelties, The March of Time, Our Gang comedies, and Popeye the Sailor cartoons.
- Cinesound newsreels made by an Australian film company were also shown regularly and, in the days before television, gave patrons the opportunity to see important local news stories. National anthems would be played, and people would stand.
- Colour films started to appear during the 1940s and 1950s.
- Saturday matinees – full of boisterous and excited kids.
- For adults it was a sense of occasion and a reason to dress up - there would always be an interval.
- Friday and Saturday nights were the most popular and some people had recurring bookings for the same seats. The 'cuddle seats' were popular. Many still had live music (organists were popular).
- As distinct from the Hoyts chain, the Balwyn Theatre was one of a group which advertised in the daily press as "Independent Theatres" screening many Australian-made films. This independence partly explains why the theatre survived in the years following the introduction of television when many of the Hoyts' theatres, such as the Balwyn Time Theatre, closed due to lack of patronage.

Post 1950's

- The introduction of television created ripples in the industry and was partly to blame for the closure of many 'single screen' theatres.
- Cinemas tried new technology such as Cinemascope and Cinerama - it was costly and not all films were produced in that format.
- When known as the "Classic" in mid-late 1960s, it often had 'nostalgia' screenings of old films for the area's older demographic & interest groups.
- 70mm films became the new immersive experience in the mid to late 1960s. And still are today – Oppenheimer is a great example.
- By 1966 80% of Australians owned a TV and diminishing attendances meant cinemas operated Thursday-Saturday only. Drive-Ins started to be introduced as more people had motor vehicles.

In a new era

- Viewing habits began to change and people were more likely to see new release movies in the city. It was taken over by Village Cinemas in June 1968 and re-named Balwyn Cinema.
- By the 1980s the face of cinema changed with a new business model - the introduction of multiplexes, many in line with shopping centre development.
- The face of the industry changed and Palace Balwyn was one of the few remaining theatres in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne – the Rivoli also being one of them.
- It was taken over by Palace Cinemas who converted it into a triple screen cinema (flooring the dress circle to screen) in February 1994, and the seating capacity was reduced to 784.
- In 2001 work commenced to become a 5 screen complex by building 2 additional screens on the site next to cinema; 156 seats each, which opened on 27th June 2002.
- In 2018 the Boroondara Council granted The Balwyn Cinema a heritage overlay.

Renovations

- The original box office (and box office sign!) and terrazzo floors of the foyer were revealed in 2005, after a major flooding incident.
- The original ceiling of the original cinema 3 (now Cinema 5) had an effect that made it look like stars when the lights went out.



Recent history & today

- In 2010, 80th Birthday Celebrations were held with events and bar specials.
- A major, architecturally sympathetic expansion when another 4 cinemas were added making a total of 9, which opened on Boxing Day 2016.
- Another 2 cinemas opened in March 2017, utilising a new entrance.
- Today Palace Balwyn has 11 auditoria, with capacity ranging from two 17-seater cinemas to the largest, holding 246 (Cinema 5). Palace Cinemas Head Office relocated to Toorak Road, South Yarra.
- The heritage of the cinema is centre to present day operations.

Renovations – some interesting 'reveals'.



- Some interesting anecdotes of things that were revealed with the 2016 renovations (and earlier).
- Original stained glass boarded up in 80s.
- The carved love note.
- The backstage discovery.
- The plaster relief reproduction.
- The heritage flooring revealed after flooding in 2005.
- Ghost sightings.

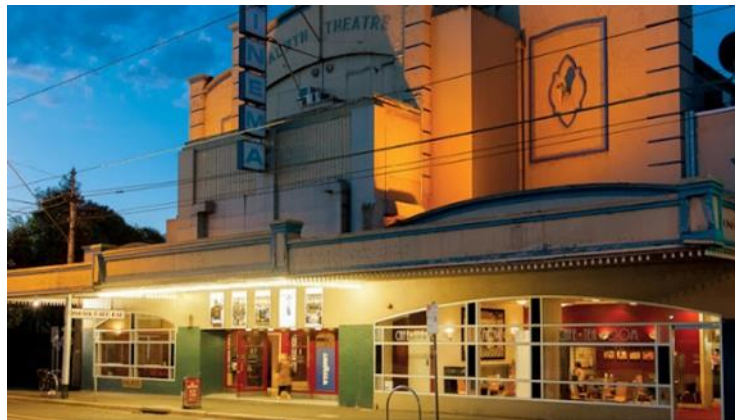
History of Palace Cinemas

- Antonio Zeccola, founder of Palace Cinemas, began screening films to small but enthusiastic audiences, projecting movies imported from Italy in town halls and other venues in the 1960s.
- By the mid-late 1970s, Antonio operated a few suburban cinemas including The Metropolitan in Brunswick, The Roma in Bourke Street and The Palace in Bourke Street from which the group derived its current corporate identity as Palace.

The Zeccola family all work in the business



- The group continued to flourish throughout the 1980's and early 1990's with the addition of a number of successful locations such as the Dendy Brighton, The Balwyn Cinema, as well as The Verona and Academy Cinema in Paddington, NSW.
- In the last 20 years Palace has continued to grow their captive audience with modernist expansions in Melbourne and Sydney, introductions in Brisbane, Byron Bay, Canberra and Perth, and preservation of heritage art-deco gems, such as The Astor Theatre.
- Today, Palace Cinemas comprises over 180 screens across 24 locations nationally that offer sophisticated comfort and a chance to escape and indulge.



Vale

We sadly acknowledge the passing of Helen Martin, a long-standing member who contributed many interesting anecdotes to our meetings from her long and happy life.