

A SHORT HISTORY OF BRANDON AND...

THE 'AVENUE' CINEMA

It is the afternoon of Monday 11th February 1935. Mr Ben Culey, proprietor of Thetford's 'Palace' cinema, stands proudly inside the foyer of his new cinema, in Brandon, just off the avenue, while outside, people stand in anticipation of being the first to watch a movie here. There was an old wooden cinema on this site, but it mysteriously burnt down last year, not long after Ben bought it. With the embers of that cinema barely cold, Ben erected a large board hyping up a replacement ... "*Super Cinema to be built on this site, to be opened in October next, to hold about 500 people*". The trouble was, October 1934 came and went, with no sign of any building work.

Ben's hype only made residents impatient for their new cinema, after all they had to leave town to watch the latest movies. People also complained that teenagers were congregating and being anti-social because they had nothing to do, so a cinema would be a welcome distraction for them. Ben responded by blaming red tape, forcing him to change his design, a change that cost him dearly. You see, the delay meant Ben had to cancel several movies that were booked, and paid for, in advance. In November, he whets the town's appetite further by announcing his cinema will be called 'AVENUE'. December 1934, saw the first brick laid and then the building goes up very quickly. The final touches were to plaster the exterior in something called 'snowcrete' and install a neon sign above the door, spelling out the cinema's name.

Ben now beckons us through the doors, where he greets us as his first paying customers. He wastes no time in telling us he co-designed the building, along with an architect at the West Suffolk County Council. As we walk upon sound reducing rubber tiles, attendants greet us to take our coats and hang them in the cloakroom. Ben now takes us through to the auditorium, where we see the striking orange upon pale blue hues. At the front is an oak panelled stage, while hanging above are grey curtains covering the large screen. The 'wow factor' are the painted Italian landscapes on the ceiling – views of the Bay of Naples and the Italian Lakes. Apparently, this auditorium has one of the most modern projection machines in East Anglia, its walls are covered with acoustic boards and fresh air is provided by a ventilation system shifting 10,000 cubic feet of air per minute. Ironically, Ben had to install a generator to power all this because the cinema, like much of Brandon, is yet to be hooked up to mains electricity!

We take to our seats and soon the excited audience is hushed to silence. It is none other than Ben's bank manager who stands up to welcome us all and apologise for the building delays. He concludes his speech by saying he has great pleasure in declaring the cinema open for business. The lights dim and it's finally time for the movie, which is called, 'One Night Of Love', and is based around an opera singer, played by Grace Moore. For added entertainment, Mr Len Sewell plays his piano-accordion during the interval, after which a second movie is screened.

Today's performance will be an overwhelming success and this cinema will be packed out for a few decades yet. Its glory years will be during the war, when buses bring people into town and complaints are made about the lengthy queues to get in.