

A SHORT HISTORY

STAG

SEVENOAKS

STAGE • SCREEN • COMMUNITY

**Stag Theatre
Stag Cinema
Stag Plaza
Stag Select
Stag Theatrical
Stag Business**

A short history of The Stag

The Stag opened on Saturday 22nd August 1936 as the Majestic Cinema. The first feature starred Jack Buchanan



Victor Crawley, General Manager of the Odeon in the late 1940s and early 1950s

& Fay Wray in the musical farce "When Knights Were Bold" a film which the Daily Express described as "a rare triumph of unimaginativeness".

It was the era of cinema as mass entertainment and it was at the time one of three purpose-built cinemas in Sevenoaks (The Majestic, the Granada and the Carlton). Such was the

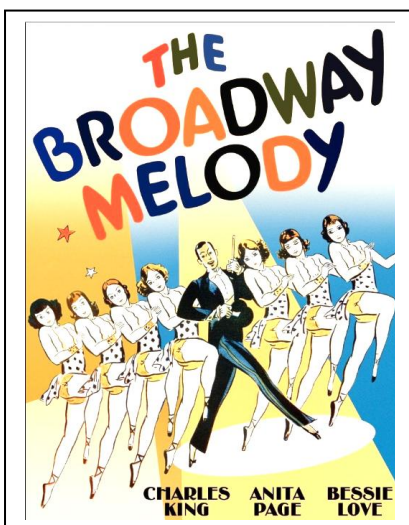
popularity of cinema there was also a fourth cinema in Sevenoaks – on Tubs Hill: The Palace.



Royal Crown Hotel, London Road ca 1895

SUNDAY PROGRAMMES		MAJESTIC SEVENOAKS	
Nov 5th	RITZ BROTHERS - GLORIA STUART JOY PARADE 1 ALSO Adventures of Chico	NOVEMBER 1939	
Nov 12th	ALICE FAYE - TONY MARTIN SALLY, IRENE AND MARY G GEORGE BANICOFF - ANN JOTHAM HELL SHIP MORGAN 5	The Home of Sunday Cinemas	
Nov 19th	VICTOR HUGLIN BATTLE OF BROADWAY 5 HELVYN DOUGLAS & VIRGINIA BRUSH WOMAN OF GLAMOUR 5	TIMES OF SHOWING Continuous 1 p.m. - 10 p.m. daily	
Nov 26th	Watch Posters and Newspapers for Programme.	PRICES OF ADMISSION (including Tax) 2/4 1/10 1/3 1/- 6d. Children: 1/3 1/- 6d. 6d. 6d.	
★ CAFE ★ LUNCHES TEAS SUPPERS SERVED IN THEATRE IF DESIRED		General Manager: R. V. BROWN Telephone: SEVENOAKS 1454 FREE CAR PARK	

The Majestic was erected on the site of the Royal Crown Hotel, a luxurious hotel built in 1820 on the site of an Inn dating to 1622. It was extended in 1868 and in 1922 it was described as **"an old established hotel; 12 acres of picturesque gardens; tennis courts; livery yard; motors & motor garage"**. Hit by the recession, it had by the 1930s fallen on hard times and was demolished. The Majestic Cinema was designed for Cohen & Rafer by the architect George Coles and replaced the hotel in 1935/36. It had a small stage, a restaurant and café and was designed with 1263 seats – 426 in the circle (which is now with some re-modelling in the 1991-93 refurbishment, the theatre auditorium with 456 seats).



The first cinema in Sevenoaks was The Palace opposite Tubs Hill station (now Sevenoaks Station) which opened on 6th January 1911 with a hand-cranked projector initially seating 240 but later 400. It was re-vamped and enlarged to include raked seating, stalls, a balcony and a café to seat 550 in 1926. The New Palace Theatre on St. John's Hill was opened in 1928 and in December 1929 became the first in Sevenoaks to show a 'talkie' with "Broadway Melody" which won Best Picture Oscar in the awards' first year. It was replaced by The Carlton which opened on 23rd September 1935.

The mid-1930s was a busy time of change for the booming cinema market in Sevenoaks. The Palace Theatre opposite Tubs Hill station was closed in December 1936. It briefly became a theatre and the building was later completely demolished.

The New Picture Theatre on St. John's Hill was rebuilt in 1935 as the Carlton and re-opened on 23rd September 1935. It became a Granada, opened briefly providing a stage in Sevenoaks as the New Carlton Theatre before finally re-opening as the Embassy Cinema.

It closed on 13th February 1954 after showing its final feature "The War of the Worlds". The building was used for storage and business and it was eventually replaced by flats in 2016.

The Cinema Electric Theatre at the bottom of the High Street was closed in June 1935, rebuilt as "The Cinema" opening again on 4th November 1935. It was sold on and became The Plaza in 1937 and a Granada in 1947. It finally shut in October 1960 and the building was demolished to build the new Suffolk Way.

The Majestic on London Road was re-branded as the Odeon in 1943 and a children's film club was started during the War in February 1944 which brought regular large crowds. Victor Crawley took over in 1947 and remained as manager of the Odeon Cinema until the



Odeon Children's Film Club December 1944

mid-fifties. By the sixties the Odeon had become and now remains the only cinema in Sevenoaks. However during the Seventies it began a long decline as so many cinemas of the time did. In 1972 the stalls were split off into two smaller screens with the circle remaining as the main screen. Despite this the decline in audiences



Odeon Cinema 1949

continued. It was leased to Brent Walker in October 1975 and re-named The Focus. It was finally taken over by Sevenoaks District Council in 1981, briefly marketed as ACE Cinemas and finally leased to a local pressure group, the Sevenoaks Theatre Action Group (STAG) - from which the Stag now gets its name - although the acronym is no longer used. A temporary conversion in 1983 created a stage using scaffolding donated by the builders of the original Waitrose building on the High Street. The first theatre performances in the cinema space were by the Sevenoaks Players – Gilbert & Sullivan's "Trial By Jury" and "HMS Pinafore". However the Action Group wasn't successful and didn't make enough money to repay the £100,000 necessary to fund their lease to the District Council. It closed again in September 1984 and re-opened on 25th June 1985 with a play "Inherit The Wind" after the present stage and backstage areas were built by Deacons, the developers of the Waitrose store for a nominal £45,000. The Stag survived because of the generosity of the District Council leasing the Stag back to the Action Group for just £4,000 per year. However in 1991 the District Council again had to step in to recover the bankrupt operating organisation. It wrote off the losses the operators had incurred, invested around £3M in building the Stag Plaza, re-fitting the insides completely and first bringing in the Art Deco features which are now seen throughout.



Odeon Cinema staff – VE Day, 1945

The Stag cinema seating was first replaced in 1999 and the two re-vamped cinemas re-opened on Friday 26th November with the Bond film "The World is not Enough". In 2016 the seating was again replaced and improved. The lighting was also converted to LED.



Cinema screen capacity was increased from 106 to 128 in screen one and from 102 to 110 in screen two plus dedicated wheelchair spaces and improved sightlines.

The Town Council took possession of the Stag on 2nd January 2009 and its original intention was to open at Easter that year. Pressure from local drama groups helped the Council's team to work wonders as The Stag had been closed, dark and cold for six months. It re-opened in mid-January with the Sevenoaks Entertainers' pantomime of Cinderella & the Glass Slipper. This meant the Entertainers continued an unbroken run of pantomimes at the Stag which started in 1990 – a record only interrupted by the Covid pandemic but re-started in 2022. The cinemas re-opened for the February 2009 half-term using the flexibility the digital equipment provided and which means The Stag Cinema can show multiple films throughout the week. The first films at the new Stag Cinema were the Disney animation "Bolt" starring the voices of John Travolta and Miley Cyrus, the children's film "The Secret of Moonacre" and the surprise hit "Slumdog Millionaire". New equipment was added to show 3D films in 2014 and new digital projectors and computers in 2016 and improved replacements in 2021. The auditorium seats were completely renewed in 2013. The Stag's operation to be open for 364 days per year was only interrupted by the Government's use of pandemic lockdowns. It has been open every day and operating as a Not For Profit Charity since 2010. The Council and the Charity plus funds from the pandemic Culture Recovery Fund have invested nearly £1.5M of capital spending into the building since its re-opening. In 2023 55kW of solar panels and 104kWh of storage batteries were installed in a 3-way funded project between The Stag, Sevenoaks District Council and Sevenoaks Town Council

Some problems though never seem to change.

When we showed the film "Rock Around the Clock" starring Bill Haley and His Comets in 1957 the cinema caretaker (Alf Benyon) had to make repairs to the seats. Look carefully and you'll see



the cast iron supports for the seats are the ones which were only replaced during the upgrade in 2013 following a grant from Ibstock Cory alongside fund raising and money from operating revenue savings made during the year. The traditional seats (from 1984 with the 1950s supports) are available to buy and some will be refurbished and used as foyer seating when time and funds allow.

And last but not least a Sevenoaks Chronicle article from 1953 on the problems Sevenoaks suffered then about parking - and from 1961, a picture of the state of the South Park car park before the District Council took it over which also shows the coal boiler room and chimney which were demolished in 1991 to make way for the Stag Plaza.



Parking Troubles In Sevenoaks

DIFFICULTY in finding adequate parking space for cars in Sevenoaks is still worrying members of the Urban Council, one of whom felt, at last week's meeting, that the whole problem should be considered by their highways committee.

The council was considering a recommendation that the surveyor be instructed to investigate and report on various methods of overcoming the present difficulties which arose in connection with the "no waiting" restrictions and the parking of vehicles in the High Street. They felt the surveyor should have regard to the desirability of introducing unilateral parking and providing special parking for motorcycles.

Mr. W. V. G. Johns did not

think those methods would help very much. He referred to the Odeon car park, which had been offered by the owners at a rental of over £100 a year, and he felt the money would be well spent. He wondered, if the company would not come to terms, if the council had any compulsory powers in the matter.

The impasse might be overcome by the council re-opening negotiations with the Odeon company, who had a car park for 100 cars standing empty at the peak-time of the parking problem for the town. He thought the measures suggested in the recommendation were merely pricking the surface.

He moved that the matter be referred back to the highways committee, which was lost on a vote being taken.