

Cinemas of South Auckland by Allan Webb, 1995.

The main cinemas of my childhood. They have given me long and wonderful memories that the youngsters of today will never be able to experience.

Movies in the 1950's were mainly musicals, drama and action movies, many being war films. In fact, the most popular shows have become the least popular in today's market. There were the horror and adult films, but they were restricted.

My parents tried to take me to the pictures when I was young, but all I did was scream my head off, so that put paid to that until they thought they'd have another go at age seven. That seemed to be a different ball game and from then on, two or three trips to the movies each week became the norm. I am nearly 49 years of age now.

My father liked double features and we would travel to many of the suburban theatres for the most suitable fare. Westerns were very popular. Unfortunately, as a child, I was not very impressed with the number of films that had songs dotted throughout, when there appeared to be little need for them. But that was the order of the day. There were the many musicals, the dramas and the action movies. I recall many war films during that period. In fact, the most popular shows have become the least popular in today's market. There were the horror and adult films, but they were restricted and naturally were out of my grasp.

When there was a particularly strong movie at the double feature houses, they would often put a Scotland Yard or Edgar Wallace short on before the main feature. I suspect that the film hire was probably a factor in this type of programming. The single features were always preceded by the 'shorts'. There were the news (a very important subject in the days of no television and very little news on the radio), the travelogues, cartoons, the well received Pete Smith specialities, the very boring James A Fitzpatrick travelogues and the almost equally boring travelogues that were repeated with each film company. You could see a short on India or Singapore with a Fox film and see the same places represented by another film company. This may be repeated many times. We did have the popular Look at Life series and the National Film Unit put out some very fine local supports. And naturally, we saw the trailers for coming attractions which were eagerly awaited. Sometimes we were really entertained by one of the one or two-reeler comedies such as Laurel and Hardy, The Three Stooges, The Little Rascals and so on. Serials such as Universal's "Mysterious Mr M" were shown as part of the supporting programme at the "locals" on Saturday afternoons.

In those days, the programme had to be a minimum of 11,000 feet, which is about two hours. The local had the 8 o'clock chimes and finished about 10.20 pm. Every night 'The Queen' in its shortened form was shown at the beginning of the programme. Occasionally, the whole thing was laboriously shown (eg the Star, Papakura) and at some theatres a record only was played at the end (eg the Windsor, Papakura). There was always a mad rush to exit before this was played because one always had to stand for the 'Queen'. 'The End' was tagged at the conclusion of the film. The only credits were at the

beginning. You never saw them at the end, nor were they so long or involved as they are today. Of course most of the films were a lot shorter than today. That was before the blockbusters.

Out the front of the theatre were the 'scenes' from the films. Usually, there was a daybill and a couple of 11x14 photos. These came in sets of eight, but you didn't get to see all of them. There weren't very many one sheets on display. They were dearer than the daybills and that was probably the reason. All the front of the house publicity was most unexciting - totally lacklustre. Daybills were sometimes glued to outside boards in odd places, but not too readily seen. All in all the advertising material at the suburban houses was pretty limited. In the foyer were a few daybills and/or 11x14 photos and that was their lot.

Advertising in the papers was fairly limited. The local papers played the biggest role in the newspaper advertising. The main daily papers were only used, in many instances, a few issues weekly and those that did advertise daily, the ads were very limited. The film might be classified as a musical or drama, or western as the case might have been. Not much idea really, but the main stars were usually mentioned and this was a very major factor in determining if you would go or not. If Gary Cooper, Humphrey Bogart, Bette Davis and so on, were in the movie, then you would go and see it.

The night at the movies was the most eagerly awaited event. Much better than listening around the radio. We usually went on Mondays and Thursdays.

Now you have to remember that conditions were quite different than those of today. There was virtually no competition. Theatres did not have to be up to the mark. Then, on the other hand, there were few good disinfectants and cleaning equipment was pretty limited. Vacuum cleaners were very ineffective. Carpet was a luxury and runners were sometimes made of matting. Terrazzo or lino in its various forms were used. Bare boards inside, of course. Limited heating if any at all. Maybe a few extractor fans, if that and they were of little significance especially if there was a big house. So conditions weren't the best. There were no stainless steel urinals then.

The seating was always grouped in different standards according to the price. The front circle always had the best seats, with the next best in the back circle. The back stalls were the next best in quality and the front stalls were the 'tramcar' seats. They were usually vinyl, but sometimes old moquette which made the theatre smell very musty. There were no shampoo machines, so carpets and seats were never cleaned. Seats that were ripped or falling apart, stayed that way. The clamps worked loose and the screw holes got bigger, so they fell apart more and more as time passed. The match sticks shoved into the holes only helped for short periods as they would soon fall apart again. Everyone threw their litter on the floor so there was a lot of rubbish. Vermin, especially mice and rats, were always around the buildings. No really effective poisons were available, no deodorants etc available like today. The toilets were pretty crude and smelly at most theatres. In several, the Gents was located along the back of the building and

when you used them, you got wet if it rained. In the winter we would wear heavy clothing including coats and still froze. In the summer it was so hot, we would feel quite sickly, but we still loved those outings which will always be remembered and cherished.

Serials were shown as part of the supporting programme at the locals on Saturday afternoons. My favourite was Universal's 'Mysterious Mr M'.

We lived at Papatoetoe and were very lucky to have a lovely intimate local theatre called the Central licensed to operate 6/6 days, run by Mrs Freda Tracey. It seated about 530 (listed as 500, but there were a few additional rows of 'tramcar' seats placed very close to the screen), probably a half in the circle. It was a stadium-type auditorium with two entrances, one on each side, half way up the building, with a crossover aisle which would take you from one side to the other and this separated the stalls from the dress circle. The circle had a banister in front of it. There were always arrangements of flowers in the front of the auditorium on each side as well as the landing going up to the theatre on each side. There were three small display boards in the small foyer which were up quite high. They only had a daybill or two photos, or both, on them. Outside were two moveable boards with a heavy base. The Central theatre snipe with Friday - Saturday - Monday was on one and Tuesday - Wednesday - Thursday on the other. Each had a moveable frame for two 11x14 photos and one daybill. They were outside the front of the theatre during the day and during performances, but put inside each night. The Central was one of the best suburban theatres. It didn't smell as the exit doors were open every day, all day. It was clean and tidy. The presentation was always very good there also. From the front there were four doors. Only the middle two were used.

The foyer floor was in Terrazzo. Later on Mrs Tracey covered this with a rich Persian carpet in keeping with the aisle carpets of a similar design. She loved Persian carpets but this was the only part of the decor that I felt was not entirely in keeping with the design or usage of the theatre. To the right was a small recess with a form for sitting on - this was, in latter years, turned into the ticket box. Immediately in front was the ticket office. This was a gem. It had two openings for talking and two for taking the money and issuing the tickets. The patrons always formed two queues. Mrs Tracey would stand at the windows and issue tickets alternately to each queue using the one cash till. This was fast and I mean fast. Then you went to the left up the stairs or to the right up the stairs, depending in which line you were in. This also was fast having no restrictions. The toilets were behind the cash box being underneath the circle; the Gents to the left and the Ladies to the right. The ladies had a problem for there was only one cubicle and this was slow. The confectionery bar was to the left of the foyer. It was incorporated into the milk bar which had its own front entrance and was opened during the day. Reservations could be made there. The bar was an Island and was staffed by the Usherettes, while the milk bar was being attended to by the day staff. This was controlled by the theatre. Many of these type of operations were leased out. The theatre was staffed entirely by females except for the projectionist.

Entry to the auditorium and the projection room was at the back flanked by two corner areas containing seating. The back row in front of the projection room had straight back seats due to the smaller row width. There were double seats for a few rows from the edge of the stairway to the aisle, due to lack of space. The seating in the circle was pretty good with mainly theatre chairs as opposed to lace web chairs used by Kerridge. The seats in the stalls graduated from the very basic type with a box squab down to the tram seats in the front stalls. I can only very vaguely remember the auditorium before the renovations. The walls were done in soft board, different shades in a chequered design, as many were in those days, with small triangular light fittings on the wall columns. The walls were in their natural state, rather drab with inside shutters along each wall with lids that could be opened during the day for fresh air. I can remember one day watching a movie during a storm and the shutter kept on opening and banging down. These were all removed and closed in when the alterations were completed.

Heating was by gas rings. A unit was beneath the stage and by a draft system only (no fans), the heat wafted out to two ducts with openings in front of the stage. These were turned off after interval. With the large houses there was little need for efficient heating, however in the latter days it was to be found out just how completely inefficient the heating really was. Some time later, the front of the round openings had louvre-type coverings put in which somewhat camouflaged the vents. After the alterations, the walls had been painted turquoise. New light fittings on the wall panels were installed. They were shields of metal painted black with holes around the outside, longer than wider and were effective. The ceiling was painted white with three black troughs which went along the whole roof with recessed lights. To the rear of the ceiling there was a large opening where the extractor fan was. During winter this was covered internally by slides. In the corners in the roof were two 24 inch extractor fans. Probably the best form of ventilation of all the smaller theatres, but still very inadequate during hot weather with the big crowds. The proscenium was a picture frame with coloured neon strip lighting recessed around the edge. I can remember red and green but there may have been amber as well. At the bottom of the inside, coloured lights shone onto the curtains which I would have called Brocade. This gave a rather silvery effect on the off-white patterned curtain. A unique and lovely frontage. I told Mrs Tracey once how I liked the whole idea of the frame and its effect. She proudly informed me that it was her idea. This theatre had love given to it and it showed. The projection room could be entered from the rear of the circle as well as internally from the left landing on the stairs to the auditorium. There were Kalee projectors. The projection room fronted onto the street and had shutters which opened up and you could take in the view. There was a little balcony under these shutters. An unusual clock with a ships bell for striking was designed and built in Onehunga by Mr J. S. Gibbons and was replaced by an electric clock at the top of the facade for all to tell the time. (I can never remember the bells striking.)

When business slowed down considerably there was little need to man the ticket office and the confectionery bar at once so Mrs Tracey had a new service area installed to the left. At that stage the ticket office was only used when necessary. At the same time the stairway to the projection room was blocked off and the milk bar became a separate shop

for different use. The top of the facade had a clock in the centre forming a mini tower. You always told the time by the Central clock. The top of the veranda displayed a large sign, lit at night from behind, with interchangeable letters about eight inches high. The Central was always my favourite suburban theatre and the wise Mrs Tracey, my favourite manager. She once told me that she tried to learn something new each day of her life. She continued to operate the theatre until the competition became too great and then leased it to the opposition. Mrs. Tracey had a vertical two-sided neon sign installed which became a feature of the facade. By this time, I had become involved in other theatres and my interest in the Central waned. It was never the same to me after Mrs. Tracey gave up control. It closed permanently about May 1987. The Central is now a shopping Plaza. The facade and clock remain and look impressive from the street opposite.

On 12 September, 1928, the Central Theatre, a free adaptation of the Spanish style, opened. Mr. R. Corbett had it built to show silent movies. It was part of a complex, the Central Buildings, the area's first commercial development and in 1987 was still standing. The whole of the seating and furnishing was carried out by Mr. Tonson Garlick Ltd. The first movie showing was free thanks to the generosity of a Member of Parliament. The film was 'Thief of the Dark'. Four different proprietors owned the theatre between 1928 and 1932, when Mr V M Tracey became the Central's longest established operator. The Cinema was very popular with the American troops from Cambria Park Camp during World War II.

We usually travelled South to either Manurewa or Papakura. Manurewa had the Regent with seating for 465 people and was licensed to operate 4/6 days, which was run by Modern Provincial Cinemas, part of Eddie Greenfield's circuit, which included the Berkeley, Mission Bay (their flag ship), Capitol, Balmoral and last and least the Windsor, Papakura. Greenfield had an office on the corner of Wyndham and Queen Streets in the City and the four managers met there every Thursday. Manurewa and Papakura had little time or money spent on them over the period of time and the programming showed that films were bought to a price rather than for the picture quality and box office. They were both double feature houses.

The Regent was fairly stagnant. It had an attractive art deco facade, with the Regent sign on the face. The foyer was small, flanked by a shop either side. On the right was the theatre milk bar, open during the day, with an opening slide facing the foyer for theatre patrons. The foyer was also art deco and I am sure there was some concealed coloured neon lighting in the foyer ceiling. The manager was a little, old, bald-headed man of little stature. The gent's toilet was outside at the rear of the building, one of the unsavoury types. To enter the outside, you had to go into what probably was just a storeroom with little in it. Then a door would lead outside. There was no cover. A lot later the storeroom was to become the gent's toilet. I think part of it was extended into the foyer. A double stairway, complete with banister, in the middle of the foyer towards the rear, led up into the auditorium. The walls were of soft board in its natural state. It was a very long, narrow auditorium. Right along the ceiling was a trough which had concealed neon

lighting. At each end of the trough there was a white light in the middle facing down. The circle was stepped and was a long way from the screen and arranged in three sections with two aisles. The stalls were raked and had two divisions with a wide aisle covered with a thick, soft kind of material. No carpet runners. The seats were not up to much. They were made of vinyl and the box type in the stalls. I never actually sat in the circle. The draw curtains had a curtain above them, looped in semi circles across one another for effect. When the frontage was altered for cinemascope (the equipment coming from Germany so the advertising said) the same draw curtains were used with additions to each side in a different fabric. The original curtains were silvery and the additions were burgundy. The same curtains at the top were used and stretched out as far as possible, but it was not far enough and a gap was left at each side. There was supposed to be an oil-fired heater in existence but I doubt if it was used much because I can never remember being warm there in winter. I do remember keeping my feet tucked up on the seat when a rat ran past me. The advertising in the foyer was once again very limited. This theatre did not leave a great impression upon me, even though we went there often. The facade was quite different from that of the original theatre which had three large sets of windows with a large diamond above the centre set. Above the diamond, the top of the facade was curved but horizontal each side. The 'new' Regent was very much art deco. Above the entrance way, which was offset to the left of the centre of the frontage, protruding in two levels, a large neon Regent sign went from the top to the bottom. The individual letters were placed directly onto the facade from the first protrusion to the right but not the full distance. There were four over-hangs which gave a shadow effect underneath. To the left from top to bottom, two corrugated patterns emerged.

The first theatre called Manurewa Theatre, built in the early 1920s by Mr. Osborne, burned down in Easter 1939. A new theatre was built on the same site and opened December, 1939, as the Regent. It closed and was demolished to make way for the Bank of New Zealand in March 1965.

The next town was Papakura where there were two theatres, both licensed to operate 6/6 days.

I really feel that this situation would have been difficult for both exhibitors. This was a small town with no outlying districts. Admittedly it was pretty isolated, which no doubt helped and was inhabited by a fairly large number of Maoris who were particularly good cinema goers in those days. However, I think the film companies would have played one against the other. It goes a bit like this; The Star management paid the most for the films and got the best product, but the Windsor was part of a circuit that included two very strong locations and this would have created some good bargaining power. Universal films were hot off their City releases to the Star, because Papakura was the only location South of Auckland that was out of the so-many-mile radius that meant that the product could not be shown early. Once again though, the crowd went to the theatre that had the most popular film. The Star always did the best business. I can only remember the Windsor doing especially well with three films being "Summer Holiday", "The Singer Not the Song" and "Blue Hawaii." When Greenfield died and his circuit was up for sale,

Kerridge wanted the Barkeley, Mission Bay, a prime situation then and even so today. The condition of the sale was that Kerridge operated the other three situations until they could be sold or whatever. When Kerridge took over the Windsor, he had such tremendous power over the film companies, the Star could not get the product. Eventually, Bert Berry paid (\$7,000 I believe) for the licence of the Windsor so it could close. This was a lot of money in those days, for a piece of paper. This happened and the theatre was sold to Lees Travel who used it for years later.

Both theatres were 'dumps'. The Star (1926) was very large and barn-like, with a seating capacity of 850 people, and was a Cinema with no stage to speak of. Originally it was a hall and there were shops along the right hand side. Due to its popularity, the shops were made into part of the auditorium by placing girders onto the existing trusses. Eventually these gave way and the back of the ceiling fell down, the side walls started to move apart and the back brick wall went backwards and the water started to come into the theatre even when it was not raining. There were two stories. The circle was entered by a stairway to the left of the stalls entrance way. Under the stairs was the Manager's office until the alterations, when it became a storeroom. Neither the Star or the Windsor had a confectionery bar. There was a milk bar next to the Star but it was a separate entity. The circle was quite small while the stalls was very large. The circle balcony was very wide and because of its height and width, the front circle of four rows of seats produced poor sightlines. To compensate for this, the seats were raised off the floor, more so at the front row. The only entrance to the stalls was on the left side. The projection room was at stalls level. Before alterations, the big walls had dark curtains draped in between the panels with one small coloured bulb (blue or maybe green) in a fitting in the middle at the bottom which was supposed to light up the curtain but was inadequate. The proscenium had, all around it, a light box with frosted glass in the front with a criss-cross design of some description behind the glass. The theatre always smelt musty. The aisle had moveable matting. My father once mentioned the smell to A.

(Bert) E. Berry. Bert was the manager and part owner with a Mr. G. W. Wilson (who sometimes worked for Bert). Wilson was always very grumpy. Bert said that they had had trouble but were getting a vacuum cleaner that would solve the problem. When cinemascope was installed the theatre was completely renovated. I remember sitting amongst the considerable amount of scaffolding while watching a movie. The ceiling, which was painted black, had one drop from the circle to the stalls and even then the stud was great. There were six large domes and into each one, a wheel with several lights was placed, which shone down. They very rarely ever seemed to all work at once. The walls were also painted black and a design of various rectangular shapes, sizes and colours was done in peg board and put onto the walls. Each part of the design was nailed onto the wall but they all protruded slightly. The overall effect was somewhat dull. However, the frontage saw the removal of the light box and instead, an off white draw curtain was installed and at each end of this, the same type of curtain was hung although it was not moveable. This was for the main curtain to go behind when it was opened. The curtains were lit with blue and green fluorescent tubes which did look good when they were all going, which wasn't too often.

Before the alterations, the theatre had a couple of kerosene heaters. They were quite useless but it didn't matter because they were never on. Then they installed five electric fan heaters, three downstairs and two upstairs giving a total output of 15 kw. You can imagine in this vast area how ineffective they would have been. No matter, for they were never turned on either. There was no form of cooling and the back circle which was closest to the ceiling could get stiflingly hot. The back circle wall was not at street level as there were rooms at the front of the building, used by printers. New aisle runners were laid, but the right hand side of the stalls was still left concreted. The circle received new bright red modern theatre chairs and the stalls had the left over circle seats installed. The seating downstairs wasn't very good as so many were ripped and that is how they stayed. Unfortunately the very wide banister obstructed the view of the screen, so the seats in the front of the circle of four rows were put on blocks, ranging from low at the back to high at the front. This made sitting down uncomfortable as your feet could not touch the floor. The seats in the circle were close together. The presentation at this theatre was very poor. There were often breakdowns and delays. The films never seemed to start at the advertised time of 7.45 pm. The projection equipment was old and in poor condition. It was a double feature house for many years. Gradually some of the bigger films were singled and later on, many programmes were not supported by another feature. The foyer was altered and separated inside by two sets of double doors which acted as a void. Here were those kerosene heaters which were always going in winter. The best place to be and that's where the manager/doorman stood. From there you went into the auditorium which felt like an ice box. The poor cashier had to sit in the first entrance way and also freeze. There were two sets of doors installed out the front with a display board in-between. The cashier's desk was behind that division. The doors were rather unique in that they slid open to a V. Fire regulations insist on doors that open outward and that was the only theatre I have ever seen with V doors like that and opening inwards. The left set were usually closed. The display easel boards were placed out the front onto the pavement and fitted a one-sheet. Either one sheets or 11x14 photos were displayed. There were a few similar boards inside, but little else. New toilets were installed at the same time and they were up to the mark. A small new manager's office was put into place next to the toilets. Here Bert could listen to the races on his radio. In spite of the conditions, we enjoyed many, many movies there.

The Star was virtually rebuilt as the Cinecenta, then renamed the Star and is now a large plastics store.

Modern Theatres (Provincial) Ltd

The Windsor (circa 1936-1937) had a seating capacity of 545 people and was a different story altogether. This theatre was managed by Lambert Fountain, the local undertaker, and he had a faithful assistant, Rhona, who was deaf. The first night we attended, Dad bought stall tickets as always but Lambert Fountain said that as it was such an awful night

we would go to the circle. Now this was what he was like. A real gentleman. He told me that the Windsor was the smallest theatre he had ever managed. He used to manage theatres in England.

The theatre did not look as though it was purpose built. There were three sets of windows out the front of the building. The outside two were at the rear of the circle and filled in. The centre was for the rewinding junk room that fronted the projection room. The foyer was quite small. There wasn't a confectionery bar anywhere near the theatre. To get to the foyer you walked up a set of stairs to the four front doors. On the landing at the top of the stairs sat two display boards, one on each side, with the 'now showing programme' on one and the 'next change' on the other, a limited display of 11x14 photos and a daybill. Inside on either side of the entrance, was a display board which contained four or five photos. There might have been a display board above the ticket box. The ticket box had no protection what-so-ever and was situated in the centre against the back wall of the foyer. It was very open. The manager's office was to the left of the foyer and the ladies toilet to the right. The toilet had one cubicle only up high and no door so my mother told us. Later they enlarged the Ladies into the stalls and put in further facilities. The Gents was out the back down an alley and on several occasions they forgot to unlock it. It was an appalling toilet. If you were very tall you would have to stoop as the ceiling was so low. Even when it was tidied up and painted it still was awful and smelt. Interestingly enough when the Star toilets were upgraded you had to go to the Windsor and use theirs and when the Windsor's were done up, you had to go to the Star's. Once again, the walls were softboard in its natural state painted during cinemascope alterations, to my recollection. There was an oil fired heater each side in the centre of the stalls. Each one was different, but rarely turned on. A very musty auditorium which smelt as though it was never aired. There were wall-fitting lights, one stem producing two light shades upwards spreading out like a flower. The lights on the ceiling came down like a pyramid upside down with three circular shades each one getting smaller. The steel girders were not concealed and were underneath the ceiling, taking on the shape of the roof. The stalls floor was flat and all the seats were put on boards and could be moved. I don't think it was used for anything other than the movies during this period. When cinemascope was installed, a new curtain was put in place. The light display was one of the best I had seen. Behind the screen was an enormous stage and below the stage, a huge area as well. I don't think it was used very often, either. I can remember hearing a few electric organ interludes on special occasions. The circle had three divisions; a front circle and two small sections in the corners which were usually shut off. The seating wasn't too grand. The rear stalls had seats with moveable backs. They were okay, but the front stalls were the basic box type and were higher than the back seats. The circle seats at the back were old and covered with moquette. But here's where the Windsor scored again. The projectionist was Ralph Baxter and he never missed a beat. From his hot-as-hell booth, he put on a perfect show. This theatre never started late. In the middle of a tune if it was 7.30, then it started. Mantovani's Favourite Waltzes was played until only the hole was left, then Mantovani's Favourite Melodies Volume 1, then Mantovani's Ballet Melodies, always Mantovani. The Queen was played at the end - the shortened version on record and usually you only got the last few chords as it had to be programmed before the end of

the film. By that time a fair bit had played through. The Windsor and those who worked there made it a very homely place to see a movie. That was the first theatre that I had ever seen a projection room. When I was about 13 I dropped a note at the ticket box to say how good I thought the presentation was. During the first film, I was summoned by Rhona to see Lambert Fountain and I was taken to the Projection booth. It was untidy and hot, but it was the living heart of this theatre. Closed 1964 as a cinema, the Windsor has now been demolished. The Windsor was always cheaper than the Star.

From memory, the Proscenium after cinemascope had been installed, had vertical protrusions at right angles from the inside coming to the outside front walls and it was from these panels that coloured lights shone. The Windsor was originally called the Paragon and owned by William Richardson. The two Lever brothers bought it, then Lambert Fountain managed it on behalf of Modern Theatres (Provincial) Ltd. Originally all the balls were held at the Star and Windsor theatres. The Windsor also had skating at one time and annual school concerts. One photo shows the large backstage area as well as the lean-to roof on quite an angle placed alongside the building to cover the alley, partway to the gent's toilets.

TOWN GROWING UP

Ernest Clarke

The Walkers provided background music at Papakura's Paragon Theatre, relieved by Len Kernot, whose forte was singing. When little Freddie Walker was projectionist, he introduced levity in the form of slides as a diversion in the interval. With no thought of malice he photographed personalities during the week, in awkward situations, often in the innocent company - say - of someone's wife.

The thrill of having, on the glamorous screen, a picture of oneself, cancelled out embarrassment. A film now and then, such a feature as "Zeebrugge" or "Rewi's Last Stand", came in for a special daytime showing for the standards classes of the whole school. The two Lever brothers owned the Paragon, which closed down for a while and was renovated to re-open in competition with the Star, first as the Regent and later the Windsor.

And now for the jewel in the crown.

Papatoetoe was lucky in that it already had a well run Cinema. After two years, a licence was finally approved and building commenced for the Otara Luxury Cinema, which was opened on 16 September 1957 with The King and I, and Norm Dawe at the Jennings Electronic Organ. This was due to the enterprises of two young partners, Garth Postlewaite and Alan Roycroft. Alan currently lives in Hawaii. They were running the Metro Cinema in Mangere East and overcame many obstacles to obtain the licence for the Otara. Building time was 10 months and with poured reinforced concrete walls nearly eight inches thick and steel portal frames, the design was simple and economical. The sightlines for the 45 foot screen were excellent in the circle. The seat casts were made

from aluminium and were set out to give a harlequin effect of seat colours. "The hardest part was to segregate the colours in an uneven pattern so you would not, for example, have two greys in line, diagonally or straight and so on". The Otara had a proper battery emergency lighting system. Usually in those days the most you would expect from suburban cinemas was to have an auxiliary light switch board so that if the power went off there was no lighting at all. The heating was by an oil-fired unit, the best of any cinema, anywhere. A generator was also installed near the heater furnace and movies would run in spite of power restrictions at the time. This cinema was spotless and the most efficiently run of them all. Nothing ever seemed to go wrong, although I can remember power shutdowns, probably before the generator was installed. The presentation was excellent. The screen results and sound were perfect. Fridays saw early evening as well as later shoppers' sessions at 6.00 pm and 8.45 pm. Saturdays had the 1.30 special children's sessions including the Birthday Club (which I was not a member of), plus the 4.45 pm and 8.00 pm shows. Midweek also saw two shopper's sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 12.30. These session times were never given at other suburban cinemas. The projectors were the Rolls Royce of projectors - Bauers and were still in excellent condition right up until the closure in mid 1992. Even the Candy Bar was innovative with an Espresso Coffee machine and table and chairs. The first drink coolers with a fountain action in New Zealand, were installed here. Alan told me that they used to roll about 1800 to 2000 ice creams every Saturday.

The main entrance was situated on the corner of Main Gt South Road and Maxwell Ave. There were two sets of double doors which took you into the small foyer with a large window to the left. To the right was the entrance to the Confectionary Bar and Coffee Lounge. Just past the front doors the ticket box was situated on the right. There were four smallish display boards in the the foyer and a small passageway that led to the Ladies on the left, then the Gents in front and the entrance to the Theatre proper to the right. Inside, a passage way went right across to the far side of the building where an emergency exit was situated. The other two emergency exits were at the front of the Theatre, one to the left and the other to the right. The walls were plain with a roughcast effect, painted off-white. The ceiling virtually took the shape of the roof with what looked like large blue sheets, no doubt made of some sort of sound control and/or insulation. Going from the rear to the front offset underneath the apex a large panel with a channel underneath that contained a neon light strip. This made the panel glow red as the light gradually faded outwards towards the edge of the panel. The proscenium was made of curtaining. The curtains at the sides were fixed, with the main draw curtain opening behind them. I believe it was a white curtain and that the drapes at the top were red and hung sideways from each side to the centre, where the drape was widest, producing a scallop effect. Dangling down from behind these was another set of curtains which gave a pelmet effect to the main curtain. The Jensen organ was to the right. The wall light fittings were unique; large round opaque glass fittings with a gold band around the outside and a rather unusual modern art design splashed on the wall face. These were offset from the walls and had light bulbs behind them. The light therefore travelled along the walls as well as in front of them.

At the rear on both sides were large long shutters which opened out from the top to the bottom and left open by chain. They were opened during the day and during summer evenings when movies were being shown. This was before we had daylight saving. With these vents open and the very large exhaust fan at the rear on the roof, the ventilation was the best of any Cinema. There was even a Cry Room at the back on the entrance side. The circle was smallish compared to the stalls and was of stadium design, having excellent sight lines. The stalls were flat. There were three divisions, the centre being the largest. The sides in the circle numbered eight seats while the stalls had six. The passageway was fenced by frosted glass trellis. This was also a unique feature for a cinema. Basically these design features remained even though a new draw curtain was installed, the seats replaced, the wall lights removed and gold curtains draped along the walls with pelmet lighting above. The organ was replaced but eventually removed altogether as interest in this sort of entertainment waned. There was a neon sign out the front, hanging vertically in the centre of the facade, with the words O T A R A, vertically and CINEMA, horizontally, underneath. At each end of the verandah, horizontally mounted, were neon signs with Espresso COFFEE Bar Teas Snacks signposted. There were draw shutter doors at the front of the confectionary areas that were opened out to the main path out to the Great South Road. In 1975 the name was changed to Starlight. In 1964 Allan Meekings went into partnership with Norman Dawe, buying the theatre. Later on, they formed an agreement with Skyline Theatres, which was a partnership of Kerridge Odeon and Amalgamated Theatres and they leased the theatre from Allan and Norm, who remained the owners until it was sold, having closed as a theatre in May 1992 to become a Butcher/Fruit Supermarket in August 1992. Mr Meekings was innovative with projection equipment and was the first to bring out a platter with a Xenon bulb light source and instal a Starlet processor for front sound plus surrounds. The Theatre had a great reputation for excellent screen and sound results and people travelled from far to experience it. The original projectors remained in situ until the closure. Rudall Hayward's "To Love a Maori" became one of the country's better known early local films, screened first at the Otara. This cinema was always extremely well maintained by the landlord, right up until its closure.

The above constitutes the main Cinemas of my childhood. They have given me long and wonderful memories that the youngsters of today will never be able to experience.