

THE FAIRFIELD THEATRE, VICTORIA

by Tony Tibballs



Fairfield Theatre frontage - 6 September 1947

The Melbourne suburb of Fairfield, 6 km north east of the CBD, is mainly residential, close to the meandering Yarra River with its historical boathouse and adjacent parklands. In 1888, a railway was built between Collingwood and Heidelberg, with the outer circle railway branching off through Kew to Oakleigh at the railway station, then known as Fairfield Park, near the present Fairfield shopping centre. This name derived from the namesake near the present housing estate established by a land boomer speculator of the early 1880s, Charles Henry James.

The suburb's first and only picture theatre was built on Station Street for a Mrs Rose Lewis and Mr T.M. Hodges. They were already business partners in Richmond. Mrs Lewis was the proprietor of the **Richmond Theatre** (1912) and Mr Hodges was the designer and owner of the **National Theatre** (1911), both in Bridge Road. He also leased her theatre for a short time. Their new venture, the **Park Theatre**, opened on 29 April 1914 in the centre of the shopping strip, a short walk north of the railway station. ⁽¹⁾

The **Park** was basic, inside and out, unlike the impressive **Northcote Theatre** (1912) only

2 km west. Even so, it featured in advertising to entice prospective buyers of housing blocks to the suburb. ⁽²⁾ It seated 1200 people. The design of the internal layout of the theatre is nearly identical to the **Richmond Theatre**. Interestingly, the builder of the **Park Theatre** was a Mr R.H. McDonald, also of Richmond. ⁽³⁾

A distinctive curved veranda with posts sheltered four glass entrance doors, with two small shops either side. Other than the veranda, the brick façade was typical of many suburban theatres of the period - more like a large two-storey shop than a statement of design. In the foyer, a central staircase led to the small gallery and bio-box on the upper level. The entrance to the stalls was through a single door. Two exit doors were set halfway along the walls, with two emergency exits either side of the stage. The toilets, rudimentary at best, were outside at the back of the building, either side of the generator shed. They were accessed by open passageways on either side of the corrugated iron structure. It was this cladding throughout its life that gained its nickname as the 'Tin Shed'. An outside stairwell on the north side provided an exit for the gallery level.

At first the theatre screened on a Wednesday and Saturday evening, with a matinee on

Saturday. The stage was only suitable for simple concerts. Musicians in a small orchestra pit provided accompaniment in the silent era. Most of the roof wasn't lined, but some painted decoration adorned the upstairs foyer. A canvas ceiling lining came later.

In 1918, Mr James Brown took over the lease at Fairfield. ⁽⁴⁾ An experienced exhibitor, he had run the original **Thornbury Theatre** at 911 High Street from 1913 until 1917 and had extensively remodelled it. At Fairfield he soon relocated the staircase to the right side of the foyer and extended the gallery, while adding another entrance door to the stalls.

When Mr Robert McLeish took over in 1924, he found that the bio-box had been relocated to the rear of the stalls. This was out of step with the practice elsewhere, but one explanation is that it increased the gallery seating where ticket prices were higher.

Robert (Bob) McLeish, had established himself as a major player in suburban Melbourne's picture theatre scene. A tenor who toured with early shows, his initial managerial success was at the **Prahran Town Hall** from 1905, with 'McLeish Weekly Pops', a mix of films and vaudeville. When the **Northcote Theatre** opened in 1912, he was appointed manager for the owners and, by 1920, had leased the theatre, taken over the **Newmarket Theatre** (in 1917), as well as the lease of the **Clifton Hill Theatre** (c 1918-21) and had then built the first **Rivoli Theatre** in Burke Road Camberwell, as well as the **Austral** in Collingwood, both opening in 1921. This remarkably quick expansion would establish Robert McLeish Theatres Ltd as a prominent Melbourne suburban theatre exhibitor. ⁽⁵⁾

Under McLeish, the name was changed to the **Fairfield Theatre**, though it had been colloquially known as that for some time. Its name was etched in gold lettering in the leadlight glass above the doors. This was the year that the new, nearby **Ivanhoe Theatre** (only three railway stations further east and reputedly built for an inaugural director of Hoyts, Mr James Denton), opened as one of the first 'stadium' style cinemas built in Melbourne.

Robert McLeish and his relationship with the other major exhibitors of the time is an



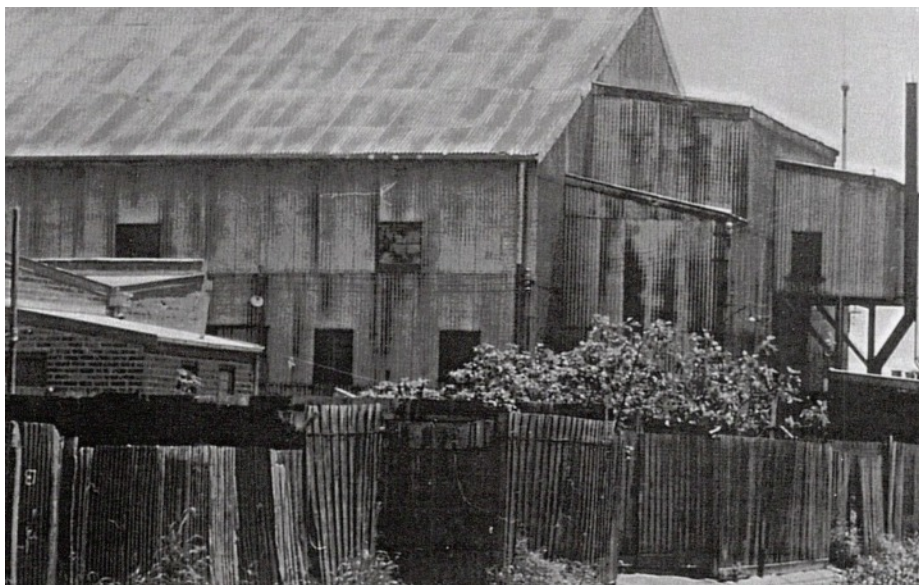
Crowd at Fairfield Theatre Auction on 15 November 1957

interesting one. F.W. Thring (Snr), head of Associated Theatres Pty. Ltd., as well as George Griffiths and Ernest Turnbull of Hoyts, all competitive men, were prepared to work with McLeish, when economic realities merged with mutual interest. A patrician figure and industry spokesperson, it helped that McLeish had founded the Cinema Industry Benevolent Fund of Victoria, chaired the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association of Victoria and was prominent in charity work.

McLeish was unusually close to Associated and Hoyts. He managed their **Broadway Theatre** in Camberwell from 1926-43, shared ownership with Hoyts in the **Regal Theatre** at Hartwell, and his Junction Theatres Ltd included Hoyts as a junior partner. In 1921, he lost the lease of the **Clifton Hill Theatre** to Hoyts, then regained it in 1932. Often with Hoyts, but not of Hoyts, his influence within Victoria's major theatre chain exceeded that of any exhibitor.

As a relatively early adopter of sound, Robert McLeish had accompanied Frank W. Thring (Snr) overseas in 1929. The **Fairfield Theatre** converted to 'talkies' on 23 January 1930 with the film *Broadway Melody*.⁽⁶⁾ An elevated, corrugated iron extension was added to the back wall behind the stage and screen to house the cone speakers. The bio-box was also extended and, by this time, internal ladies washrooms had been installed in one of the previous front shop areas. The manager's office was now behind the ticket box on the right as you entered. This may have occurred earlier (c 1926) when a new switch room, with duplicate controls for auditorium lighting in the office, was installed.

During research for this article, CATHS member Peter Ricketts mentioned he had a family connection with the **Fairfield Theatre**. His grandfather, William 'Old Bill' Davies had been the caretaker under the employment of Robert McLeish Theatres from c 1928 to his retirement in 1948, with several other extended family members also being employed during some of those years. Peter himself also has very early memories (and his first experiences leading to his ultimate profession as a projectionist) where he visited the bio-box close to where the family always had reserved seats at the back stalls. Fortunately, he made



Rear of Fairfield Theatre, circa 1950, showing small stage with speaker housing built onto the rear

some oral history recordings in the early 2000's, with his mother and uncle describing their recollections of the **Fairfield Theatre**. (refer to more detail in articles 'Through the Porthole' in issues CR 44 & CR 47).

William 'Bill' Davies was the 'jack of all trades' at the theatre. His 'office' was attached to the generator shed at the rear of the theatre, although his duties were extensive. He was the cleaner, seat repairer, took ticket bookings, changed the poster display boxes with his own artistic decoration additions, collected films from the station, usher, the relief doorman on occasions, as well as many other duties required to keep a cinema running smoothly for the manager.

He would have seen several managers over that time. In January 1933, he would have perhaps been present when the then manager, Mr Leslie John McLeish (brother of Robert McLeish), collapsed and died at the theatre, aged 45 years.⁽⁷⁾ Mr M. Scott may have taken over as manager after this, and was still there in the late 1940s.

The quality sound system of the **Fairfield Theatre** meant that it was used as the preview theatre in the 1930s and 40s for the McLeish Theatres managers to assess the films for future screenings in their respective theatres.

The new Eftee Films talkie *The Sentimental Bloke* was test screened in early 1932 at the cinema before its first Melbourne city screening at the **Hoyts De Luxe** on 29 March.⁽⁸⁾ At many of these previews, Ellen Davies (Peter Ricketts' mother) and her sister would provide afternoon tea and, as a token of their gratitude, receive promotional lobby cards. Apparently the only time the sound was not up to standard was when

heavy rain pounded on the tin roof. Its lattice ceiling could not provide adequate sound insulation.

Albert 'Bert' Davies (along with his brother, Jack) were employed during their younger days to transport the film canisters at interval to other McLeish Theatres, usually the **Northcote Theatre**, by motorbike and sidecar for the 'switch'. There is also documentation that **Fairfield** also switched with Hoyts **Ivanhoe Theatre**, as well as the **Clifton Theatre**. Bert also had responsibility for illuminating the billboard on the south side of Fairfield Station, as well as opening the blue velvet curtains by hand at the start of the night.

At some stage the verandah at the front was altered to a cantilevered design. There was no confectionary stand in the theatre, but with two milk bars either side in the 1940s and '50s, as well as another nearly opposite, the audience could be well serviced. One of the shops also provided the lolly tray-boys at interval.

Having already expanded by building the 'new style' **Regal Theatre** that opened in 1937 in Hartwell, Robert McLeish Theatres' related company, Junction Theatres Ltd, undertook building its largest and most prestigious picture theatre project. It opened the new (2nd) **Rivoli Theatre** in Camberwell, complete with roof garden, for its circuit in 1940.

In 1944, the **Fairfield Theatre's** worn linoleum on the floor was replaced in the aisles. In comparison to his other theatres, little money was expended. The seats in the stalls were the usual padded tip-up seats, but the seats in the gallery had comfortable air cushioning.

The senior projectionist for many years was Alf Stewart. Another CATHS member, now deceased, Geoff Edwards (and best remembered as the owner of the then **Cinema Charlton** - now known as the **Rex** from 1974-86) lived in Fairfield as a youngster in the mid-late 1940s. In 1947, he attended many matinees and some evening sessions at his local theatre, keeping a diary of the films he





Former Fairfield Theatre building in 2010 (Image by Royce Harris)

saw, with occasional comments. It makes interesting reading. He attended a matinee screening in August when he asked Alf, the projectionist, "What happened to the advertised feature on the poster outside, as it wasn't shown?" Alf went outside to look at the advertisement himself. He came back and said, "You're right. I didn't look to see what I should have been showing, but can't answer why it wasn't on". Geoff also describes other occasional malfunctions in screenings as well as listing the films screening in 1947, (many being revival films of the late '30s and early '40s) as well as when the theatre had a 'full house'. Another projectionist for many years was Bill Curran. Another name associated with technical matters for the theatre is Arthur Pyers who, it is said, converted the Simplex projectors with front shutters to rear shutters in c 1954 for CinemaScope. Another local resident and CATHS member, the late John Brown, was also a relief projectionist in its latter years.

There is documentation in the Health Department files that, in June 1949, Robert McLeish had proposed to purchase property on the south side of the present theatre, with plans drawn up by theatre specialist architectural firm Cowper, Murphy & Associates for a major remodelling of the **Fairfield Theatre**, utilising the shop next door. These plans had also been drafted by the Hoyts Engineering Department (and stamped for approval), showing the relationship that Robert McLeish Snr (and Jnr) now had with the much larger cinema chain.

Then, on 6 October 1953, Robert 'Bob' McLeish died suddenly at home at the age of 70. Fortunately, his son, Robert Jnr, who had also been involved in the company for many years, was able to implement a smooth transition as the new head of the company.

However, the plan for either demolishing or remodelling the **Fairfield Theatre** did not occur, and was communicated to the relevant authority as being due to financial

circumstances. One could speculate whether the company had foreseen the imminent impact of the introduction of television or the economic rationality of having so many other theatres in proximity of the suburb. The **Northcote Theatre**, the **Westgarth Theatre**, Hoyts **Ivanhoe Theatre** and the **Clifton Hill Theatre** were all within 4 km of the 'Tin Shed', with theatres in Kew and Thornbury not much further away.

Fairfield's first CinemaScope feature was *The Robe*, two weeks after the **Northcote** and **Newmarket** were converted to CinemaScope, but at the same time with the same feature as the **Regal Hartwell** and, as so happened, the Hoyts **Ivanhoe Theatre** on 23 December 1954.

In 1953, management had been admonished for not having a fireman present at an evening session - a regulation that also included Saturday matinees and public holidays, when the seating capacity of the theatre was over 1000 patrons. The theatre had seats for 1039 since c 1945 and, prior to that, could hold 1056 patrons.

Solution? In June 1956, the authorities were advised that 41 seats were to be removed from the front rows of the stalls. All 23 seats were removed from the front row, seven seats from the second row on each wall side, with two seats on the wall sides of the third row. Capacity was now under 1000 seats.

In 1957, the McLeish Theatres Ltd advised that they were going to sell the **Fairfield Theatre**. Certainly it was a dilapidated venue through its lack of any significant refurbishment in the recent years, other than its cinematic equipment. The company had also ceased their lease of the **Clifton Hill Theatre**, screening their last film there on 30 October 1957. Apparently in its last years McLeish Theatres had two managers managing both theatres rather than one for each.⁽⁹⁾

There were certainly other factors. The more car-centric society meant the new style of film

presentation of the Hoyts **Skyline Drive-In** theatre in nearby Preston was popular, the more comfortable and newer cinemas elsewhere, as well as the prospect of television becoming even more affordable, meant declining patronage was the prospect of the future.

The theatre was put up for auction on 15 November 1957. The last film screened was *The Shiralee* on Saturday, 30 November. Although it was advertised to still screen in Monday's papers, this probably didn't occur, as by Tuesday no regular advertisement appeared.

The theatre was soon converted into three shops, with the gallery floor extended to make a complete second floor for offices or residence. The rear of the building containing the screen was demolished and the building reduced in size, with the whole building exterior clad in brick in c 1960. Even today, the façade remains relatively intact, though most local residents have no knowledge of the building at 99-101 Station Street ever being a former picture theatre. It now houses a long established butcher and a newsagency in the ground floor shops.

NB: The McLeish Theatre chain had relinquished its lease of **Clifton Hill** in 1957, closed the **Regal Hartwell** in April 1959, the **Austral** in Collingwood in July 1959, as well as the **Newmarket** in October 1959, then the **Northcote Theatre** in 1960. The Hoyts **Ivanhoe Theatre** was one of the last theatres in the vicinity of Fairfield with reduced screenings from 1961, before its closure in 1968. The **Rivoli** in Camberwell came under the Village Theatres banner in 1983.

Only the **Westgarth Theatre** managed to struggle through the lean years to survive today as a multi-screen cinema for local residents. There is also the larger multiplex at the Northland Shopping Centre at Preston. ★

Postscript: The former theatre building is now for sale for the first time in over 60 years.

Credits:

- (1) Heidelberg News and Greenborough and Diamond Creek Chronicle, 25 April 1914, p2
 - (2) The Herald (Melb), 5 March 1914 p4
 - (3) PRoV file: VPRS 7882/P0001/Unit 248/Item 1245
 - (4) Heidelberg News and Greenborough and Diamond Creek Chronicle, 2 June 1918, p2
 - (5) Film Weekly, 11 Nov 1948, p21 & 15 Oct 1953, p3
 - (6) Table Talk, 16 & 23 January 1930, p24
 - (7) The Argus (Melb), 16 January 1933, p6
 - (8) The Age (Melb), 29 February 1932, p8
 - (9) The Showman, February 1958.
- The Herald (Melb) - various issues
Trove
Peter Ricketts's family oral history recordings
CinemaRecord issues No.44, No.45, No.47 & No.51
Kino Issue No.95
Unpublished booklet: Going to the Movies in 1947
G.C. Edwards (1999)

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