



THE MARK OF ZORRO

A Quick History of Preston's Theatres

(Prepared for Darebin Heritage by Brian Membrey)

The Mark Of Zorro : A History of Preston's Theatres

Preston's first picture venue, the Star Theatre on the south-eastern corner of High and Gower Streets opened on September 28, 1922, the evening of the Show Day holiday.

The audience was entertained by one of the cinema swashbuckling sensations of the day, "*The Mark of Zorro*" starring Douglas Fairbanks, Marguerite De Le Motte and Noah Beery ...

The movie was based on the 1919 story "*The Curse of Capistrano*" by Johnston McCulley, which introduced the masked hero, Zorro - to date, it has been re-made three times, in 1940 starring Tyrone Power, as a tele-movie in 1974, and again in 1998 starring Antonio Banderas with Anthony Hopkins and Catherine Zeta-Jones, the latter also having a sequel, "*The Legend of Zorro*" filmed in 2005.

The masked hero probably became better known to today's "baby-boomers" via an immensely popular series in the early years of television in Australia (in part remembered for the title tune having the lead character making the sign of the "zee" rather than the English "zed").



Table of Contents

The Mark Of Zorro : A History of Preston's Theatres.....	1
The Star (St. James).....	1
The Gowerville (aka The Melody).....	2
The Planet.....	3
The Rivoli.....	3
The Circle	4
The Reservoir Palais	5
The Progress	5
Preston Skyline Drive-In Theatre	6
Nightlife at the Skyline	7
Cinemascope.....	10

THE STAR (ST. JAMES)

In a scoop, the new Star managed to screen "Zorro" a week before the Westgarth Theatre in Northcote which had been operating for just on a decade. Despite the local patrons christening the theatre on the holiday, the "official" opening wasn't until the following evening when the Shire Council led by the Mayor, Cr. Gilbert and Mrs Robinson and various local dignitaries gave the enterprise their municipal blessing.

The venue was operated by Star Theatre Co. Ltd., the first chairman of Directors Mr. George Apsted.

The Apsted family had been builders around the Preston areas since the mid-1880s. George was regarded for several years late in the nineteenth century as the crack shot of the Preston Rifle Club, winning many club competitions and trophies in inter-club and State tournaments.

The company secretary was given simply as Mr. Lascelles; the company secretary as Frank Ludlow, the father of several sons that contributed to the Preston and Northcote football and cricket clubs was listed as a director.

Like most of the theatres in Preston and Northcote, there were several shops incorporated in the ground-floor design, and Ludlow in commercial terms "put his money where his mouth was", sub-leasing the offices right on the corner of Gower Street for several years as the base for his real estate agency.

The almost mandatory milk bar and confectionery was on the southern side of the theatre entrance, run for several years by Charles Chubb and his family.

Although the numbering of High Street was somewhat erratic due to the number of still-vacant sites, the Star was officially 282 with a re-numbering in the 1930s seeing it become 346 High Street.



The Star Theatre (1922)

Credit for the design and construction of the building was given to Mr. Alex McDonald, but later reports suggest that the true heroes behind the theatre's construction were the brothers Messrs A.F. and W.E. (Walter Edward) Edmonds who had run regular movie sessions for some 18 months in a hall hired at the Shire Hall.

That enterprise earned the pair enough capital to buy the theatre site and proceed with the formation of the company, which had a paid-up capital of £12,000 including 25 preference "syndicate" shares of £100 each.

Edmonds remained manager of the Star and later the Gowerville, but died in 1934 when the Gowerville was closed due to the Depression. The Star Theatre Co. also managed the Planet Theatre.

The Star is credited in part (along with its proximity to the Town Hall) as being one of the reasons that High Street became the main shopping strip in Preston during the boom times of the 1920s, replacing Plenty Road, South Preston's prominence in earlier years.

Despite the instant popularity of the theatre, the company struck problems some six months later when it applied to the Council for permission to run "entertainments" on a Sunday evening "after church hours".

The Shire had been under pressure for some time to prevent the playing of Sunday sports on Council controlled property and a predictable delegation of church leaders and a hastily arranged "congregation" packed the Council chambers to ensure the application was rejected, Cr. Llewellyn Jones the only one to vote in favour of the proposal.

Lascelles the following week wrote to the Leader, complaining that his company had been somewhat misrepresented - the "entertainments" were not to be moving pictures (their respectability still a little open to question) and he emphasised that the whole proceeds "without any deduction whatsoever" were to be handed to the Shire for whatever charitable purpose it saw fit.

Like most other theatres, the movies (and later "talkies") were not the only "entertainments". Even the unofficial opening night featured "violin selections and a lady soloist" and similar performances kept the patrons happy while projectionists worked to change reels of fragile film, some of which had to be packed and driven to a nearby theatre for re-screening the same night.

The Star is known to have been renovated in the mid-1930s and again around 1950 when it became the St. James Theatre.

Operationally, it was the longest surviving movie theatre in Preston proper, lasting until the mid-1960s despite the obvious counter-attraction of television and rock 'n roll dances at the Town Hall and the converted Circle Theatre further north in High Street.

THE GOWERVILLE (AKA THE MELODY)

The Gowerville Theatre at 175-77 Plenty Road just south of Bell Street opened on 7 May, 1926 to seemingly provide some competition for the Star; in reality, the backers were the same group that built the Star. The theatre at that time provided seating for around 970 patrons.

Unlike its compatriot, the first night was a low-key affair, the Leader's single paragraph suggesting it had been officially opened by the Mayor. Cr. Llewellyn Jones.

The movie shown on the opening night was not revealed, the theatre appears to have been available to the public on the following Monday for the screening of *The Desert's Price*, a little-known 1925 Western starring Buck Jones.

Like many theatres of the time, there were always a few gimmicks to attract patrons, the Edmonds brothers hitting on the idea of sponsoring awards for players from the Preston Football Club to be voted for by customers on the traditionally slow Monday night.

The final results for 1927 saw Danny Warr win the Star Theatre award with 2447 votes from Jack Watt with 2384 and Arthur Ludlow (one of Frank's sons) a distant third.

For the somewhat less glamorous "fairest", the Gowerville patrons went for Dave Holliday on 2715 votes, a clear winner from the 1926 "Recorder Cup", now the J. J. Liston Trophy winner, "Bluey" Summers on 1863.

On these figures, the total number of votes cast at each theatre probably totalled around 8,000 to 9,000, undoubtedly a tidy box-office return for the modest cost of two trophies!

At the time, the Gowerville opened, it was described as "one of the most modern in the suburbs" but with advent of "talkie" pictures in the late 1920s, it was upgraded in May 1930 with the installation of "special talkie gear at immense expense to the proprietors". On the programme was "Mickey the Mouse".

The expenditure proved premature.

With the effects of the Great Depression biting hard in Preston, the Edmonds brothers decided that it was uneconomical to run both theatres and the Gowerville closed later in 1930.

It was advertised as a Mortgagee's Sale in November, advertisement suggesting the theatre would seat 1300 and had a frontage of 84 feet 8 inches to Plenty Road and a varying depth from 120 to 148 feet.

Whether the building sold is problematical, it wasn't used again as a theatre until 9 December, 1938, just a week after the new Circle Theatre opened in High Street.

The Mayor of Preston. Cr. Fred Pike officially re-opened the Gowerville at a gathering of 500 guests of the management with the first public screening at the matinee session the following day.

The theatre was owned at that stage by Mr C. Lueman and the operations managed by Messrs King, Guest and Luxton, who in the intervening years had opened the Rivoli Theatre in Gilbert Road (Walter Edmonds, the key figure in establishing the original theatre died in 1934 at just 47 years of age).

The Gowerville Theatre closed again in 1949 and was extensively renovated, emerging in 1951 as the Melody, still under the control of King, Guest and Luxton. The capacity at that time is believed to have been around 1,250, the largest of any Preston cinema.



1925. Houses being demolished preparatory to construction of the Gowerville Theatre



Buck Jones, star of *The Desert's Price*. He is described in one authoritative movie database as "one of the greats of B-grade Westerns"

The advent of television in 1956 had the predictable impact, and perhaps because of its isolation from the main shopping hub, the Melody closed two or three years before the St. James and was subsequently demolished for an office complex.

THE PLANET

The Planet Theatre on the corner on High and Miller Streets opened on 30 March, 1939, again under the management of W. H. Edmonds and as part of the Star Theatre Company.

The architect was Mr. R. Le-Poer Terry and the builder Geo. Prentice Pty. Ltd., the theatre featuring "Dunlopillo seats, deaf aids in both the stalls and dress circle, and a crying room at the back of the stalls with separate speakers and volume control", the latter presumably for the soundtrack and not the crying child!.

Edmonds also suggested that a private car park would be available for patrons alongside the theatre as soon as building materials had been removed. The theatre seated around 900 and was shown in directories (along with the car park on the northern side) as 1-15 High Street with the milk bar/confectionery on the corner. .

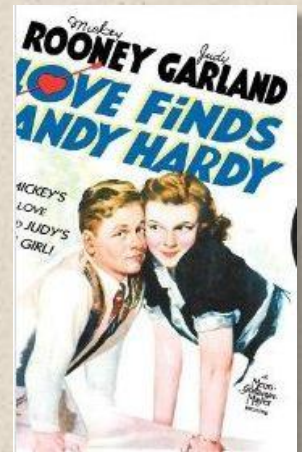
It was noted that the theatre had long-term contracts in place with both Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Paramount Pictures; the opening night feature, *Love Finds Any Hardy*, starring Mickey Rooney, Lewis Stone, Judy Garland and Lana Turner.

The building after the theatre closed at the end of 1959 was used for some years as the office and showroom of K. G. Luke Pty. Ltd., a silver-plating company owned by Sir Kenneth Luke, the long-serving president of the Carlton Football Club and later the Victorian Football League.

One of the company's sales representatives an later manager for nearly twenty years was former Preston football (later captain-coach) who in 1947 became the first Carlton player to be awarded the V.F.L.'s highest award.

It also was used for many years as the showroom for Kevin Dennis Motors, and continued in later life as part of the Autobahn Automotive chain and up until 2010 as Ace Auto Accessories.

The building was demolished in early 2012 for yet another multi-storey apartment block now dominating the Junction.



Preston President Mr. T. E. Belcher (left) and Bert Deacon receive Deacon's clearance back to Preston from the President of the Carlton Football Club, Mr. K. G. Luke

THE RIVOLI

The only theatre building remaining in Preston is the Rivoli at 71-75 Gilbert Road (on the south-western corner of Oakover Road).

The Rivoli was opened on 16 November, 1935 at a gathering of 150 guests by the Mayor of Preston, Cr. Harry Swain.

(The movie unfortunately was not revealed - the first advertisement was for *Little Miss Marker*, starring Shirley Temple, Adolph Menjou and Charles Bickford).

It was built by Preston Theatres Pty. Ltd. and leased to Messrs King, Guest and Luxton, also from 1938 the operators of the Gowerville after it was re-opened.

The building cost £5,300 and seating and fittings £2,000, but Preston Theatres Ltd. appear to have fallen into financial difficulties and the theatre was auctioned by receivers in October, 1937, bringing a price of £9,650 and a healthy return on the original investment.

It was noted the sale was subject to a five-year lease, rental £17/10 per week but to rise to £20 the following year. It was suggested the theatre accommodated about 900, two shops were included with a frontage of 64ft 5in to Gilbert Road and a depth of 110 feet.



The lessees operated the theatre until 1958 when it was transferred to O'Halloran Theatres of Swan Hill before closing later the same year.

After it had ceased operation and the building was used as offices and a warehouse, the first tenants being the Austral Jewel Case Company.

That functionality continues today and parts of a refurbishment circa 1950 are retained; the auditorium interior has some well-preserved detailing, the upper balcony still has seats, and a screen remains above the warehouse section. Much of the upper level is converted into a residential apartment.

A small reserve (significantly the Harry Swain Reserve) behind the old theatre was used in the 1950s by a local junior football team.

Originally known as the Preston Boys club in the late 1940s, it adopted the theatre's name around 1950 and became the Rivoli Stars, boasting amongst their "Stars", later Collingwood premiership captain and club legend, Murray Weideman, although strangely enough, he lived in Heidelberg Road in Alphington where the family ran a milk bar.



THE CIRCLE

The "Circle Theatre" at 499 High Street was one of several cinemas which opened in Preston during the movie boom time from the late 1930s, its art deco style and was one of the more unique designs, advertisements boasting that there was not a right angle to be seen anywhere in the interior.

The building was constructed in 1938 by W. Braithwaite Pty Ltd., tanners, and leased to Hoyts Theatres Limited.

The founder of the tannery, William Braithwaite (senior) acquired the land in 1866 and established Braithwaite's Tannery in Murray Road with the family home "Northallerton" on the corner of High Street. The site of the theatre was originally part of the Northallerton gardens.

The architects Cowper, Murphy and Applegate designed the Circle Theatre at around the same time as well-known Northcote identity Edgar "Son" Yeomans had the Sun Theatre in Yarraville built in a very similar design (one of just a handful of theatres from the era still operating, Yeoman's other theatre, the Westgarth coincidentally one of the others).

Two shops were included linking the theatre to Clinch Avenue, a confectionery/milk bar which serviced both the theatre and passing trade, the corner for many years a laundry and dry cleaners operated by Gouge Limited (later Brown-Gouge).

The Circle was opened on 25 November, 1938 by the Mayor and Mayoress of Preston, Cr. and Mrs Fred. L. Pike in front of a group of 600, including councillors, directors and executives of Hoyts Limited, and leading citizens of the district and their wives.

The guests were treated to a screening of the Warner Brothers movie *Valley of the Giants*, a full-colour movie starring Wayne Morris, Claire Trevor, Charles Bickford and Alan Hale (not to be confused with 1919 and 1927 silent movies of the same name; nor was it as the title may suggest a sci-fi movie - the storyline revolves around a battle to save a Californian valley of giant redwood trees).

The theatre catered for around 920 patrons and continued operations into the early 1960s when Hoyts sold it and it was converted into a ballroom, primarily for rock-an-roll dances.

It was later used as a dance studio and reception centre before being demolished in 1976 to make way for the Circle Arcade.



THE RESERVOIR PALAIS

(aka Reservoir Plaza, Cinema North, Village Reservoir)

Remarkably, the theatre that survived the longest in the City of Preston was never originally designed as a cinema.

In March 1928, former auction rooms in Epping Road (later 909 High Street, just north of Edwardes Street) advertised by Messrs L. E. Rossiter and R. E. Emslie as showing motion pictures for the first time. On either side of the entrance were two former shops, one housing the projection equipment, the other the ticket box and with movies being shown twice weekly.

The original enterprise did not survive the Depression, and early in 1933, the site became the Palais de Dance before being closed in August, 1935 by the Health Department.

The building was of a rudimentary design with an unlined tin roof and exterior toilets on either side of the rear of the building. It was re-opened in June, 1936 by Victoria Theatres Pty. Ltd. with fewer seats and internal conveniences.

The name was changed in July, 1943, to the Reservoir Plaza Various alterations were made, but patching up the basic structure prove inadequate wasn't enough and Consolidated Theatres, who were then in control, erected a new auditorium next door in 1955, one of the first built with Cinemascope presentations in mind and increasing the capacity from 500 to just under 900.

As the other nearby "hard top" theatres closed with the advent of television and the introduction of drive-in theatres, the Plaza was the only screen in the area by the mid-1960s.

Village (then known as City Cinemas) were expanding into the suburbs and in December, 1968 took an interest in the venue, changing the name to Cinema North. Throughout the 1970s it remained a very popular theatre, to the point that a second, smaller auditorium named the Oriental was added in 1981 at the rear of the main theatre, then renamed as the Merion, the complex generically known as Village Reservoir.

Although, the theatres survived the video boom of the early 80s, the death knell sounded with the opening of an 8-screen multiplex at the nearby Northland shopping centre in 1987.

The larger, original Cinema North auditorium was demolished and, although the newer and smaller screen carried on for a few more years as a theatre in the boutique style (with a capacity of around 240), the inevitable came in 1993 and the rest of the building was demolished for shops.



Cinema North (circa 1990)

THE PROGRESS

When is a theatre not a theatre?

The question may well be asked of the Progress "Theatre".

An extensive database of Australian (and some overseas) cinemas compiled by Flinders University (caarp.flinders.edu.au/venue) has an entry for the Progress Theatre in Gilbert Street (sic), West Preston and being operated by King, Guest and Luxton.

The theatre was actually the Progress Hall, well removed from the Rivoli further north and just south of Jacka Street.

The database suggests that movies may have been shown in the Hall as early as 1946 with the capacity variously listed as between 200 and 300.

Screenings appear to have ceased around 1959 when the hall was operated by Dee-Jay Theatres Pty. Ltd.

PRESTON SKYLINE DRIVE-IN THEATRE

Australia's first drive-in theatre opened in Toorak Road, Burwood under the Hoyts Skyline chain on Wednesday, 17 February on a 10-acre site at the corner of Toorak and Elgar roads, Burwood, the theatre said to accommodate 1,500 picture-goers and where "you can smoke to your heart's content, crack peanuts, wear slippers or shorts or a dressing-gown, come unshaven or do your knitting - what's more, you can bring along liquor - provide it's drunk in moderation".

Although part of the Hoyts chain, the Skyline was owned by a subsidiary, Auto Theatres Pty Ltd.

Plans were announced for a rapid expansion of the chain; as well as "Preston" (which was firmly Reservoir), potential sites at Oakleigh, Moorabbin, Sunshine and Geelong were mooted Subject To Council Approval.

STCA proved something of a stumbling block in other municipalities, especially Sunshine, but given the proposed Plenty Road site extended over much of the unused land next to the sand pits that had provided most of the road-making material for Preston's roads for a couple of decades, but which was of dubious quality for intensive housing development, our local Council appears to have jumped at the opportunity.

The selected architects were A. C. Leith, Bartlett, & Partners of St. Kilda Road (designers of the Burwood complex) and tenders for the project first began to appear in June "for earthworks, Roads, Paving. &c. to New Drive-In Theatre, Plenty Road, Preston. Tenders close noon, 28th June, deposit £100".

Most of the construction was carried out by Leighton Limited (now Leighton Constructions) and Melbourne's second drive-in opened, rather surprisingly, on 21 December, just four days before Christmas.

The Sun News-Pictorial dedicated a four-page spread to the occasion, mostly advertising from companies involved in the construction, although noting that the "gala opening" would be on the following Thursday (given the following day was Christmas Eve, there was no forthcoming coverage of the latter evening).

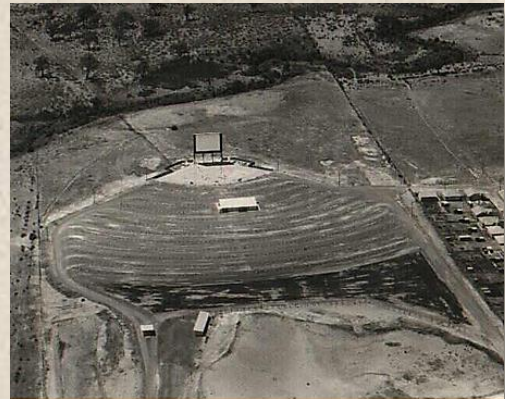
The accompanying article suggested the Preston venue was "... a bigger and more glamorous Skyline, but will have all the same features as Burwood ... a bright colour scheme with the snack bar and ticket box cerise with white stripes".

The site was described as "about a mile past the tram terminus" (then Tyler Street), but the theatre in reality was closer to two miles away and even then set some 400-500 yards back from Plenty Road, the believed entrance via today's Gremel Road and Village Drive, although the latter has almost certainly been renamed in the interim.

The new venue) and capable of holding 740 cars compared to 650 at Burwood. Another feature of the Preston site which was lacking at Burwood was a second exit road - with shows scheduled at 7.30 (sundown permitting) and 10.00 p.m., a number of problems had been encountered at Burwood in clearing the area.

On arrival, tickets were sold on the basis of the number of passenger in the car (the number of small children that suffocated because a father forgot he stacked them in the boot is not known). Attendants were on hand to wipe windscreens using cloths impregnated with a special formula to aid water run-off should it rain during the session.

The Skyline offered a restaurant, snack bar and a cook-it-yourself barbeque with patrons able to buy steaks and sausages on-site.



Preston Skyline, January, 1955

The Darebin Creek in the background, the eastern end of Summerhill Road to the right. Folk lore has it that it wasn't unusual in summer months for snakes from the creek to partake in the evening's entertainment! Part of the original sand pit and quarry are visible in the foreground and the entrance to the theatre towards the bottom left from Plenty Road appears to be via today's Gremel Road and Village Drive (almost certainly renamed). Summerhill Road probably provided the alternate exit to the right (probably the second exit).

Below, the site as it looked in 1967 Note the housing now encroaching from the eastern side in Summerhill Road, but the quarry still clearly visible in the foreground.



Initially there was also an in-car service with mobile trolleys offering hot dogs, sandwiches and coffee and tea "... push the service button and an attendant will collect baby's bottle, have it warmed in a special heater and returned to your car". (From memory, the in-car service was dropped after a year or so because of the number of "crank" calls).

Over the festive season, there were often dances starting at midnight and the projection box, glass-walled at the rear to allow the public to watch the film reels being interchange, was aid to consume enough electricity each night to keep a large house operating for three months.

The screen, 73 by 65 feet and said to be the height of a five-storey building was the largest in the southern hemisphere.

Again from fading memory, it faced in a south-westerly direction giving free entertainment (*sans* audio) to residents in the Summerhill Road area and angled to give some shelter from the setting sun, although the height of the hill at the tram terminus also gave natural protection. The area beneath the screen was utilise as a children's playground.

In 1964, competition emerge with the construction of the Olympic Twin Drive-In at Northland less than mile away.

With two screens and the additional attraction of the Shopping Centre, the Olympic probably attracted much of the custom away from the Skyline. The old site managed to keep operating until 1984 when Hoyts and Village Theatres merged operations and six of the older drive-ins close on the same night. The mergers saw a major re-development create the Northland 8 complex of today.

Most of the projection equipment from the Skyline (believed renewed in the late 1970s) was removed to the Hoyts head office theatrette in Sydney.

The land was redeveloped as todays Latrobe Retirement Village.

The Burwood Skyline closed a little earlier in June, 1983 and is now the site of an industrial estate

NIGHTLIFE AT THE SKYLINE

Following the initial release of the article on the Preston Skyline Drive-In, a couple of members of a family that lived towards the western end of Summerhill Road gave some fascinating oral history of the memories of the theatre ...

"When the Drive-in opened one of the main exits was Summerhill Road which in those days was unmade. In the summer, hundreds of exiting cars would create clouds of dust which the hapless residents had to endure.

"The bonus though, if you were interested, you could distinctly hear the movie audio and there were vantage points where you could get a view of the screen. Sometimes you were able to 'sneak in' through the gate exiting to Summerhill Road and view the last half of a movie.

"As you probably remember I worked at the Drive-in for about a year or so as one of the 'lolly boys' whose job was to prowl up and down a number of designated rows of cars watching for a blue light to come on indicating that someone in the car wanted to buy a coffee, coke, hotdog, pie, chocs. etc.

"We were trained to say when we spoke to the car driver, 'Do you require service, Sir?'

One of the challenges of the job especially on windy nights was to get the coffee back without slopping half of it out of the cardboard container. Our trays were round with a thin rim and to balance the objects on the tray as you walked up and down the 'humps' to return to the driver took some doing.

"Occasionally a person would tip the switch to turn on the blue light perhaps when they moving into a more comfortable position or to caress the girl friend next to them. The response in these situations to 'Do you require service, Sir?' was usually 'Piss-off'."



The opening of the Preston Skyline saw a number of local firms advertising their contribution to the project, but Universal Uniforms left them all in their wake, this ad. appearing on the morning of the opening of the Burwood venue, 17 February, 1954.



"Broken Arrow", the first movie to be screened at the new Preston Skyline.

Rather than the typical "me-Injun, me-scalpium" Western of the times, the movie won critical acclaim (it was nominated for three Academy Awards and won a Golden Globe Award for *Best Film Promoting International Understanding*) as one of the first films to portray the plight of the American Indian in a sympathetic tone.

Remarkably for a gala opening of the spanking new theatre, the film was already four years old, having been released in the U.S. in July, 1950.

DO YOU LIVE AT PRESTON?
If so, you may be interested in a position, at Skyline drive-in Theatre.
Applications are invited for the following positions from persons who have had necessary experience.
CATERING MANAGER.
ENERGETIC man who has had general catering experience, including stock and staff control, required to take charge of catering department, which includes Snack Bar, Milk Bar, Barbecue, and Vendings Service.
COOK (FEMALE).
LADY, who has had experience with food preparation and cooking and has the ability to control staff, required to take charge of Snack Bar Kitchen.
COUNTER HANDS (FEMALE).
ATTRACTIVE young ladies who have had Cafe and/or Milk Bar and Confectionery experience, required for Snack Bar and Milk Bar.
KITCHEN STAFF (FEMALE).
LADIES who have had experience with food preparation and service required for Snack Bar Kitchen.
CAR SERVICE PORTERS.
YOUNG men and boys required for selling from mobile food trolleys and trays.
BARBECUE COOKS (MALE).
YOUNG men required for cooking steaks, &c., at our Barbecue.
Apply in Writing, Enclosing Copies of References, to
**SUPERVISOR
CONCESSIONAIRES PTY. LTD.,
G.P.O. Box 101,
Melbourne.**

The Sun New Pictorial feature included ads from several local firms that had been part of the construction or supply process, but throughout October and November, a number of notices firmly pitched at the local job market appeared in Melbourne dailies.

There were other generalised advertisements seeking management trainees for the Burwood, Preston and Oakleigh theatres.

"From memory we received 10% for sales and a nominal amount called 'appearance money'. A plus was you could watch the movies and later in the night wander down to where the trolleys where they kept the hot dogs hot. One of my mates would use the tongs to fish the 'sav' out of the hot water. You could gorge yourself on these if you wanted as long as you didn't take one of bread rolls which were always counted by the manager.

"Sometimes I worked in the cafe and BBQ areas collecting dirty plates, knives and forks etc. At the beginning the BBQ's were not self-serve, they had chefs who would cook the food for you. Patrons bought the meat at the cafe and took it to the chefs to be cooked. Country and western music would be booming through the speakers.

"It was a great community 'feel' before the show started. Families laughing and chatting". (Tom)

"I still remember going to bed in the back room (after the road was made) and counting the shadows that the car headlights made on the bedroom wall. "I can also remember we used to go and watch TV at the Watt's house before we got one. When you walked out their front door you could see the Skyline screen. No houses next door back then and the Watts lived on top of the hill.

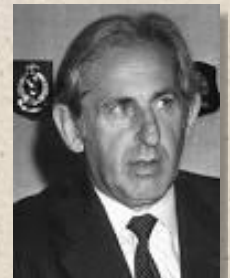
"On a sadder note there was the big prang one night when one of the exiting cars run into the back of Gillard's tray truck. They used to park it on Summerhill road, just before the phone box. I think the occupants were killed. One to google in the old newspapers maybe".

(Michael)

Of course, it wasn't all "a family feel", especially in May 1964 when Frederick Griffith, the manager of the Skyline was shot in the knee during an armed hold-up at the ticket office which netted three men £320.

The three, two from Reservoir, were later charged after detectives arrested a man in a house in nearby Chaley Street and found two shotguns, a sawn-off rifle and a rusted revolver.

The arresting officer in the case was Senior Detective Paul Delianis (right), believed to have been born in Preston and later renowned as head of the Victorian Homicide Squad.



But back to the family recollections ...:

"Did I mention I knew one of the blokes who did over the Drive-in? Well, I knew his brother who was in my grade at school right through my school years from prep.

"They knocked off my Bro's EH Holden as well and he went and confronted them as they parked his car outside their home. They "knew nuffin" about how it got there, of course, but kindly offered Tom help if he couldn't start it.

"Anyway Tom had never joined the dots together that it was the same bloke/s who held up the drive until now.

"I recall one of the blokes working at the Skyline knew him. We all had a laugh about it as we thought they could have at least knocked over something in another suburb. They obviously were adverse to travelling outside the neighbourhood when doing business.

"Least they kept it in our community. Ya gotta larf"

(Tony)

(We should add for Tony's benefit they were also up on other charges of robbery in company at Collingwood, Kew and Preston and three charges of illegally using motor cars ... don't think Tom's EH was involved - the illegal use charges seem to have been related to the robberies.

Staff at the Skyline proudly claimed they could shift 600 cars in about 12 minutes ...:

"The system is simple. Immediately a film finishes, an announcement tells drivers to check tail lights, drive forward and turn right into the lane in front. Drivers are strictly forbidden to reverse their cars". (The Age, 10 March, 1955)

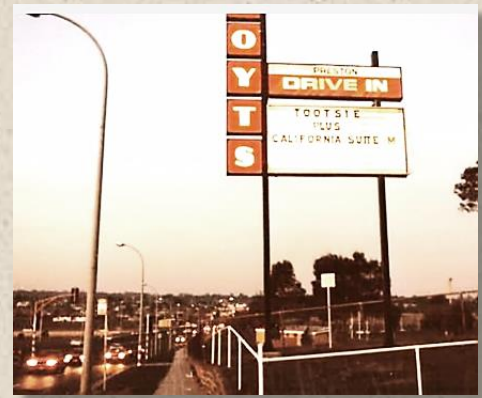
The third Skyline was in Old Dandenong Road, South Oakleigh and far bigger than either Burwood or Preston at 14 acres, mostly surrounded by market gardens. A report on its opening in March, 1955 placed the cost of a steak at a sizable 10/-, but that included a 5/- refundable deposit on the specially made steak platter and knife and fork.

A Hoyts official explained "We found we had to charge a deposit on the eating utensils because several of the steak knives and wooden plates were being stolen. They are expensive to replace". He went on to add that in 12 months of operation at Burwood, only two speakers had been stolen and one of those was later returned. The speakers were in fact useless for any other purposes.

He also added that over the previous year, just two late night sessions had had to be cancelled, both because of fog rather than rain, so the magic formula the entrance attendants wiped down your windscreen with obviously did the trick!



A Skyline speaker (later carefully in-bred to become a Dalak in the BBC's never-ending Doctor Who series).
Exterminate!
Exterminate!



Date uncertain, but "Tootsie" was released in Australia in 1983 - this and the obvious development of Plenty Road suggests the image was taken during the dying days of the Skyline

CINEMASCOPE

As well as following the U.S. trend towards open-air theatres (there were over 600 operating in America), the two or three years leading up to the introduction of television in Australia in October, 1956 saw another technical innovation with the first screening in Sydney in December, 1953 of a Cinemascope film.

Developed by Twentieth Century-Fox, Cinemascope used a anamorphic lens to create films with an aspect ratio almost twice as wide as the conventional movie and was generally combined with a four-track stereophonic sound system.

To accommodate the new wide-screen format, extensive modifications to existing theatres were required (as well as being significantly wider, the screens were slightly curved to give a limited three-dimensional effect and many of the smaller venues were impossible to convert).

There had been earlier experiments with 3-D films as one of the motion picture industry's efforts to combat television, but these required the wearing of special disposable glasses, each lens filtering certain colours to produce a "depth" effect

The Hoyts Regent in Sydney was the first to be completed with a screening on Wednesday, 9 December of *The Robe*, the first Cinemascope movie to come out of Hollywood. The Melbourne release came exactly a week later on the 16th

Advertisements in Melbourne newspapers for two months or more promoted the forthcoming release of *The Robe* in Cinemascope and organise a screening for critics and film reviewers at the end of November which featured specially tailored clips to illustrate the potential of the new technology as well as previews from *The Robe*, *King of the Khyber Rifles*, *We Believe In Love* and *Prince Valentine*.

The Argus's Keith Manzie was generally favourable in his review, in particular noting the quality of the stereophonic sound as being a vast improvement over the conventional single and earlier two-track stereophonic systems, but was less than overwhelmed over the long-term viewing experience, suggesting that, well, perhaps it might all be a bit too much for the average theatre-goer ...



"On the normal screen the camera leads the viewer's eye to the focal point of the action and subdues the non-essentials.

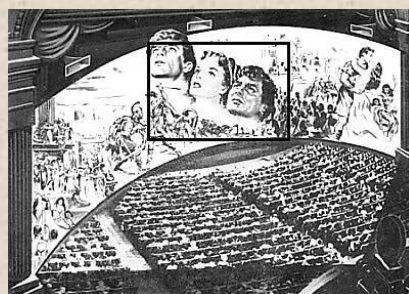
But Cinemascope projection encourages the onlooker to let his eye wander backwards and forwards across the screen and pause briefly at any spot it chooses, which could become extremely tiring with excessive viewing.

Although a most entertaining medium, it is doubtful if Cinemascope is the panacea to alleviate the ills which beset the movie industry at the moment. It is so overpowering that audiences may feel they can take it only in homeopathic doses

Its sustained success continues to depend upon the everlasting need of everyday cinema, stage, radio, and even television . . . good quality shows".

The Robe, the first Cinemascope film to be released. It was originally planned as a standard Technicolour production, but early filming was halted so it could be changed to the Cinemascope format.

Another Cinemascope movie, *How To Marry A Millionaire* was actually completed before *The Robe*, but because of epic Biblical scope of the latter, it was released first.



The image above is a Twentieth Century-Fox promotion of Cinemascope with the centre box purporting to be a normal screen. The curvature of the screen is greatly exaggerated

Venue : Skyline / Hoyts Drive-in, Preston

Skyline / Hoyts Drive-in, **Preston** ...

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