

## Norfolk Record Office Information Leaflet 27

### Great Yarmouth Cinemas, Theatres and other entertainment

These brief notes on the history of entertainments in Great Yarmouth do not include anything built more recently than 1939.

#### 1. Theatres

Great Yarmouth may have the earliest documented purpose-built theatre in England. The 'game place' is first mentioned in the Great Yarmouth Borough Court roll for 1492-3. This presumably means an area where games or plays were performed: the area is part of what is now Priory Plain. The Game Place House is first mentioned in 1539 when the bailiffs and chamberlain leased it to Robert Coppyng. This is almost 40 years before the first London playhouse was established by James Burbage in 1577. However it is not certain that the house was actually a playhouse: David Galloway has suggested it may just have been a house in which players and audiences could eat and drink while the plays may still have been performed in the open air game place. In 1594-1595 the game place house is described as 'decaied' so it was presumably no longer being used.

Throughout the centuries players probably performed at the Guildhall, as they did in other towns. The earliest specific reference to this in Great Yarmouth is in the Assembly Book of 1596. There are earlier references in the Town accounts to payments but it is not said where they played. The earliest such reference known is to the Earl of Suffolk's players in 1445-6.

From 1710 the Norwich Company of Comedians made visits to Great Yarmouth, using a warehouse where Middlegate chapel was later built. From 1736 they used the Town Chamber. In 1778 a purpose-built theatre was erected on what is now Theatre Plain: there is an engraving of it in Preston's *Picture of Yarmouth*.

#### 2. Cinemas

- The Gem, Marine Parade

Built 1908 as a wild-animal show, but opened as cinema instead. Yarmouth authorities insisted that men and women sit on separate sides of the auditorium. A local newspaper stated:

*A unique feature is that the entertainment is proceeding all day. For a small payment, ranging from 2d. to 6d., visitors can enter when they please, stay as long as they like and go out when they like. On Sundays a series of colour moving Tableaux depicting sacred subjects, will be on view*

*all day, including incidents in the life of Christ.*

The Gem was renamed **The Windmill** in 1945. It is now **Ripley's**.

**The Empire**, Marine Parade 1911-91

When it opened it was described as a 'handsome terracotta elevation, the striking features of which are lofty columns and a large semi-circular balcony.' It is now a 'theme street' bar.

**The Regent**, Regent Road 1914-82

Now a bingo hall.

**The Central**, Market Place.

Built in 1915, it closed in 1922 because of financial difficulties. Renamed The Plaza in 1928 but closed again in 1939. Demolished in 1958 to make way for Woolworth's.

**The Aquarium**, Marine Parade

Opened as an aquarium in 1883. Became a Theatre in 1896 - Oscar Wilde lectured here. A cinema from 1914. Became The Royalty in 1982. Renamed **The Hollywood** in 1992.

**The Regal**, Regent Road

Opened in 1934 and closed in 1988. Demolished.

**The Hippodrome**

Between 1903 and 1940 was used for the circus in the summer and as a cinema in winter. After 1945 it went back to circus use.

### **3. Other Places of Entertainment**

**Wellington Pier**

Built 1853, rebuilt with a pavilion in 1903.

**Brittania Pier**

Built 1857, rebuilt several times since after fires and other accidents. The present pavilion was built in 1958.

**The Winter Gardens**

Built at Torquay in 1878-81 at a cost of about £1,300. It was bought by Great Yarmouth Corporation for £130 and re-erected in 1903.

**The Paradium**

Great Yarmouth's first purpose-built amusement arcade, erected in 1903. Now **Barron's Amusements**.

**The Hippodrome**

Built for the circus in 1903, one of only two purpose-built circus buildings in England.

## 4. 'Lost' Places of Entertainment

### The Switchback and Bicycle Railway

**Thompson's Gravity Switchback** was opened on the beach opposite Norfolk Square in 1887. It moved onto the Parade in 1887 and moved again in 1892, this time to a site just north of Cemetery (now Sandown) Road. **The Hotchkiss Bicycle Railway** opened on the same site in 1895. Both ventures moved to a site between Beaconsfield and Salisbury Roads in 1900. They remained there until the end of the 1909 season when they were closed and moved to Honley in Yorkshire.

### The Revolving Tower

This was at the corner of New Beach Gardens. It opened in 1897 and continued to operate until the First World War. After the war it reopened but the revolving gear no longer worked so it became merely an Observation Tower. In 1941 it was demolished to supply metal for the war effort.



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