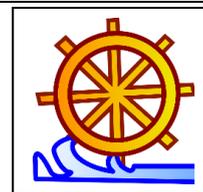




HELM



Heritage of East Lake Macquarie

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AUGUST 2020

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DRIVE-INS: EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN

Drive-ins are not just for movies any more. As the Corona virus has put an end to live concerts, theatre and shows, new concepts are emerging as to how people can still enjoy live entertainment, while social distancing. Drive-in concerts have started to be held around the world. Car parks and drive-in venues have been used for concerts, first in Denmark, then America – the most notable by Keith Urban for American health workers. A free trial concert with Casey Donovan was held at a sports centre car park Sydney, May 2020. Tickets were scanned to avoid contact; cars containing up to two adults lined up, in front of the stage; sound fed to car radios or through open windows; food delivered to cars and orders left on the roof or bonnet. Instead of applauding fans showed their appreciation by blowing horns, flashing headlights, using windscreen wipers. More are planned.



HISTORY OF DRIVE-IN MOVIE THEATRES –

“...Though there were drive-ins as early as the 1910s, the first patented drive-in was opened on June 6, 1933 by Richard Hollingshead in New Jersey. He created it as a solution for people unable to comfortably fit into smaller movie theater seats after creating a mini drive-in for his mother. Appealing to families, Hollingshead advertised his drive-in as a place where “The whole family is welcome, regardless of how noisy the children are.....” *Source: New York Film Academy* With growing car ownership, drive-ins grew in popularity, especially with Baby Boomers in the 50’s and 60’s. It was an affordable night out for the whole family. Refreshments were available; some had playgrounds for children. At their peak, Australia had 330 drive-ins. The first opened in Burwood, Melbourne in Feb 1954, with a Danny Kaye musical, “On the Riviera”. A Skyline drive-in, it was accessed by a dirt road. In the 70’s their popularity began to fade. The advent of television, then videos, made it more appealing and even cheaper to stay home and watch movies. Hollywood movies went through the doldrums in the late 60s and 70s and struggled to compete. Desperate to attract audiences, they began showing trashier movies; some became gang hangouts. The end came when the major movie companies – Hoyts, Village and Greater Union began building cinema complexes. As profitability declined, the large parcels of land occupied by drive-ins soon became desirable targets for developers.

HELM IS OPEN ON THURSDAYS AND FRIDAYS. 10am – 2pm.
 You will find us in the historic Chapel in the grounds of St Peter’s Church behind ARTEAS in Josephson St, Swansea. Currently on display are photo-boards, of times gone by, due to the generosity of LMCC Community History.



- Drive-in history 1
- The experience 2
- Gateshead 3
- Heddon Greta 4

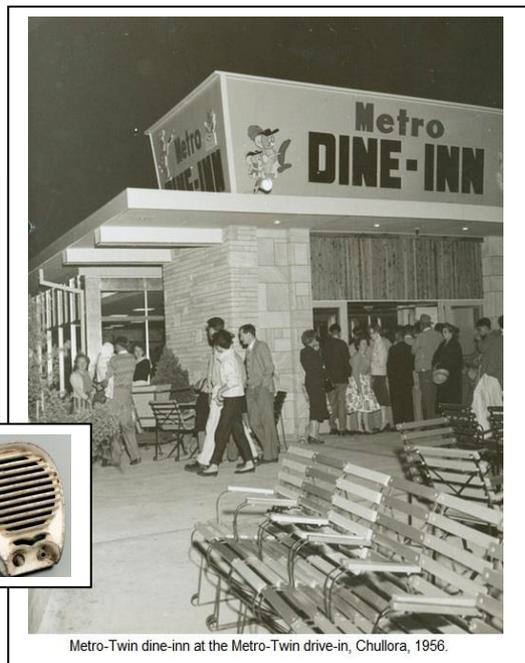


Come and grab a devonshire tea; or soup and toast at ARTEA’s. Wander through the community garden. See the art, crafts and gifts for sale in the main building. Delicious freshly picked seasonal herbs and vegies. Find a new plant for your house or garden.

**28 JOSEPHSON ST
 SWANSEA**

A BIG NIGHT OUT AT THE DRIVE-IN.

After the success of the Victorian ventures, drive-ins began popping up around NSW; mostly Skyline and Metro. 1956 saw French's Forest, Dundas and the Twin screen at Chullora open. (Paul Hogan and his family lived in a modest house in Chullora and his wife, Noelene, worked at the drive-in in the 60s.) Opening night movies were: "3 Ring Circus", "The Racers", "Walk into Hell".



Metro-Twin dine-inn at the Metro-Twin drive-in, Chullora, 1956.

In 1957 the El-Rancho at Fairfield opened with a Wild West theme – a chuck wagon to deliver meals; Kiddies Koral; with ushers in cowgirl and cowboy uniforms directing cars. At drive-ins with nearby houses, such as Dundas, people watched "silent" movies from their house verandahs and guessed at what was being said. Some climbed on to garage roofs or flatbed trucks parked outside the fences, deck chairs set up on the platform for comfort. In contrast, Pilliga in NW NSW, with a population of 600, saw many country folk driving for long distances to see movies. This drive-in didn't have individual car speakers, but speakers mounted to the screen, so that half the town would hear. Most had a capacity of about 600 cars per screen. The smallest, not only in Aust but possibly the world, and which is still operating, was at Jericho, Qld – max. 34 cars and seating for 32 walk-in patrons in a grandstand. It opened in 1969 with "The Sound of Music".

Sources: MAAS; Cinema Treasures

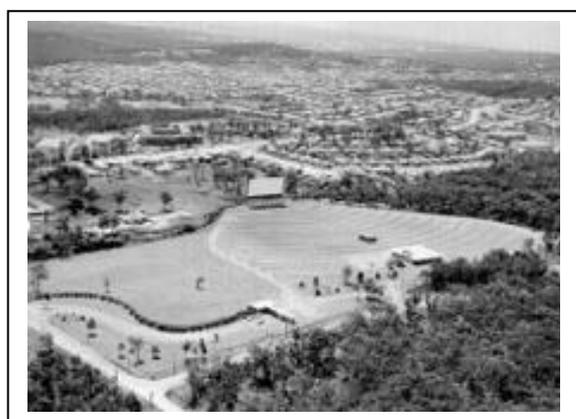
Learning from Victoria's experience, entrances were built on tarred side streets to avoid traffic jams on main roads and dust clouds. Cars joined the queue to get in, patrons paid at the entrance, and then parked next to a speaker post, mounted in rows on ramped up asphalt facing the screen. Speakers had to be regularly checked for sound and red back spiders. Teens would sometimes crawl under the fence or hide in the boot of cars to avoid paying the entry fee. Those in station wagons, panel vans and utes would often back in and then make themselves comfortable. Each post had a pair of speakers, with volume controls, one each for the car on either side to be hooked on to the window. Sometimes people forgot and drove off when the movie finished with the speaker still attached. Many families came early at 6.30 pm to visit the mostly American style snack bars, be entertained by the juke box, while children could enjoy the swings and playground before the movie started. It was relaxed, fairly inexpensive entertainment for the whole family. For parents it was cheaper than taking the whole family to the pictures; or to find and pay a babysitter. Parents didn't have to get dressed up. Children often came in their pyjamas. After a snack, it was time to get on the swings and enjoy the playground, then when the movie started, pile into the back seat with lots of pillows and blankets, until they fell asleep.

On the other hand, couples who were dating found greater privacy than at the movies. In the early days some got very dressed up – even with suits and ties; high heels and gloves. Usually there was a seating area for walk-ins who did not have a car near the snack bar. At intervals there was always a rush to be served at the snack bar where people would line up 6-7 deep, many missing the movie restart. Typical purchases were fish meals, hamburgers, hot dogs, pluto pups, chiko rolls, popcorn, chips, choc-top ice creams, chocolates and lollies. Weather was always a factor for cars. In very heavy rain or fog passes were handed out for the next night. Often cars had to be started up to demist windows or to stay warm. In drizzling rain, some rubbed their windscreens with ½ an onion so that droplets would run off. If there was a break in the movie spools, cars would blow their horns. Mechanics and car hops were on hand at the end to help people with car problems – mostly flat batteries.

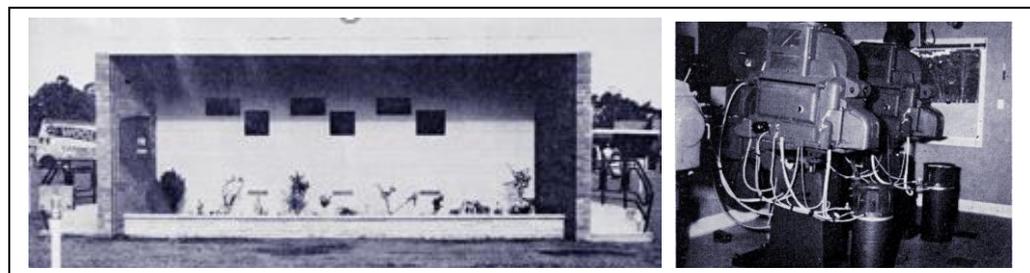
OUR LOCAL DRIVE-INS

Where once there stood Nicoll Park Speedway – a dirt track motorcycle speedway circuit, the first drive-in for the Newcastle area was built – the Metro Drive-In, on Oakdale Rd, Gateshead. It took 3 months and £350,000 (\$700,000) to construct, with a screen 116 ft x 69 ft, and able to accommodate 700 cars (later increased to 900).

Some residents of the nearby, recently established suburb of Windale were especially happy that they no longer had to travel on the back of an old canvas covered truck with a wooden floor to Charlestown - even though that was a fun night out, many a Sunday morning was spent picking splinters out of various parts of the body. On 19th Feb, 1958 a special preview by invitation was held. 640 cars packed the drive-in to watch “Don’t Go Near the Water”, a 1957 comedy romance starring Glenn Ford. The next night it opened to the general public with “Les Girls”, a musical comedy with Gene Kelly; admission for adults was 5/- (50 cents), children 9d (8 cents); 5/6d on weekends, (not open Sunday nights at first). On busy nights the traffic would back up on the Pacific Highway as far as Charlestown.



Cars would queue in a single lane, and then ushers would split them into 2 to go through the pay booths. Gates opened at 5.30pm and the first session started at 7.15; with a second at 9.45. A circus playground was provided for the children; and seating in front of the snack bar for walk-ins with special speakers (and blankets in winter). On warm nights people could spread out in front of their cars in deckchairs. When it closed in the late 1980s, over 1 million people had attended. By 1992 the site had been cleared for conversion into an industrial estate. The street names in this new subdivision commemorated the history of the drive-in – Metro Court and Skyline Way. *Source: M. Saxby*



Spools of 35mm film were manually threaded onto 2 machines in the projection booth, one spool was on; the other ready to go. When finished they were manually rewound for the next night.

Sometimes films had to be taped back together if they broke. A slide projector showed advertising, on glass slides, produced by David Koffel agency, then later by Val Morgan, often for local businesses.

About 10 km away was another favourite – the Skyline drive-in at Lambton which opened with “Three Coins in a Fountain”, a romantic comedy, starring Clifton Webb. The playground there boasted a train ride as a major attraction. It closed in 1985; and was developed into a housing estate. *Sources: LMCC; Cinema Treasures*



THE DEMISE OF DRIVE-INS

After their meteoric rise in popularity, decline came in the 70s and 80s due to a cumulation of factors. The introduction of daylight saving meant later starts. The advent of colour tv and videos enabled even cheaper entertainment at home; with a greater choice of movies. 1968 the first Kentucky Fried Chicken opened with a menu starting at 45c for 1 piece of chicken and chips, through to \$5.20 for a 21 piece barrel; followed by McDonalds in 1971 offering burgers at 20c, shakes at 20c; adversely affecting the drive-in snack bars. The oil crisis and fuel shortage saw people buying smaller more fuel-efficient cars which, however, sacrificed space and comfort. It became more comfortable and cheaper to watch movies at home. They tried to attract different audiences by showing horror and adults only movies. Some tried hiring their venues for church services, car shows, and markets to bolster their income from dwindling audiences. Meanwhile cinema complexes were being built by film distributors such as Hoyts and proving to be more financially successful. Gradually the death knell rang in the 1980s, with the valuable and large tracts of land being sold off for housing and industrial estates; shopping centers. In the 50s Newcastle Council had approved another drive-in for Kotarah, destined for the present Westfields site, but it was never built. Another Hunter drive-in was built at Rutherford in 1978, but only survived until 1984. Now only 15 are still operating in Australia; Blacktown and Heddon Greta in NSW.



First opened in 1967 with “To Sir with Love”, on the edge of town as real estate was cheap. It was one of the last drive-ins to open as colour television was coming; but the local area of Maitland, Cessnock and Kurri had no cinemas. On opening night, local vintage car clubs did a procession from the main street to the drive-in. Entry required paper tickets kept in rolls to be purchased. Like many others it closed in 1984, and was neglected until resurrected by Scott Seddon in 1997, and is still operating now. Technology has arrived, and the projection room has switched from film reels to digital. Its greatest attraction is that it is good clean fun for families of all ages, with a touch of nostalgia – a novel experience. It operates on Friday and Saturday nights and school holidays, costing \$30 cash per vehicle (up to 8 people) per movie, with gates opening 30 minutes before the start. Sound is heard through a FM car radio; or a portable FM radio with reliable batteries. The kiosk and restaurant aren’t super fancy, but have all the favourites – burgers, chips, hot dogs; candy, choc tops, soft drinks. BYO food and drinks are permitted. Many people like the fact they can get up and move around; and choose how they are most comfortable – in their cars, camping chairs, bean bags, picnic blankets, sofas in utes or backs of trucks. The first 4 rows are reserved for low cars; rows 5-15 for 4WDS, wagons, cars with roof-racks. BBQs can even be hired for functions. Some people drive for hours from places like Taree, Tamworth, Central Coast, Newcastle, for a night under the stars.

Source: ABC News



Share your story at HELM to preserve our heritage!!!

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