



# HELM



## Heritage of East Lake Macquarie

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AUG-SEP

## GOING TO THE MOVIES

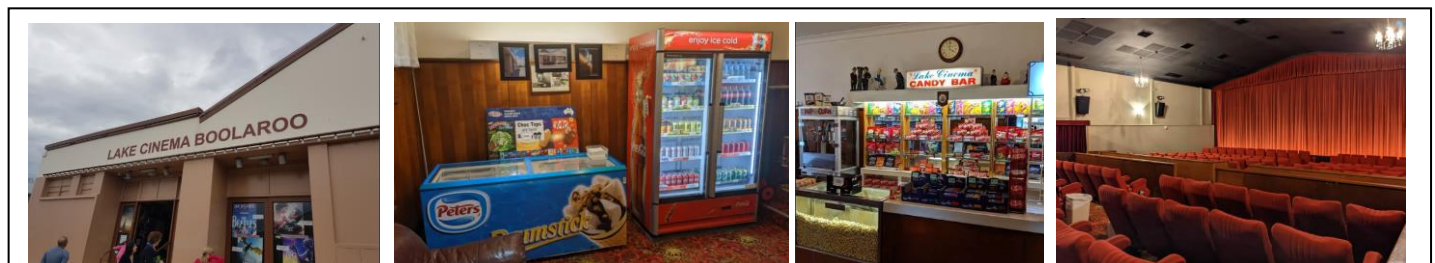
2024

Inventor Thomas Edison of light bulb fame developed one of the first motion picture cameras in 1891, the "Kinetograph". The Lumiere brothers developed this further with a camera and projector in 1895. Soon all types of halls were being used to show these "flicks" – so nicknamed because of their flickering nature. As equipment advanced, specialized halls and cinemas were built; some becoming quite elaborate. Nearly every suburb had one – Lake Macquarie and Newcastle boasting some 70 venues. Despite many innovations, films remained silent until the late 1920s, with live music accompanying the movies to build up the atmosphere.

After the early mushrooming of cinemas came challenges and closures. Patronage declined with the advent of TV, VHS / DVDs, pay TV, multiplexes, expensive digital film projection equipment, streaming services and covid.

### LAKE CINEMA BOOLAROO – 50 YEARS *Sources: Lake Cinema; LMCC; Newcastle Herald; Mike Rubbo*

Earlier this year, Bob Mason proudly celebrated 50 years since first opening his cinema on 29th March, 1974. Bob obtained a lease agreement from Lake Macquarie Council for the building, which had been a community hall in the 1920s; and a nightclub – the Garden Grove Dance Hall - in the 1950s. The unofficial opening featured the musical romantic comedy "Singin' in the Rain" starring Gene Kelly and "Show Boat". Tickets were a princely sum of 45c; a box of Jaffas was 25c. Only 2 people arrived for the preview, and it was a nail-biting time for the official opening the next night to see if the hard work and investment would pay off. The disaster blockbuster, "The Poseidon Adventure", was a sell-out. With a mantra that going to the movies should be an affordable, special, and personal event, the cinema continues to screen 10 sessions on weekends; and during school holidays. Lake Cinema has the distinction of being the last single-screen, independent theatre in the region. Bob was born in Armidale, and the family moved to New Lambton in the 1950's, where they became regulars at The Savoy, New Lambton. Here began Bob's passion for the cinema and a good story. His first job at a cinema was as an usher at the Barclay Adamstown. While working as a clerk, Bob prepared his dream Boolaroo building.



- Boolaroo 1
- Melvic, Belmont 2
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- West Wallsend 4

Things were basic at first. A box of small handheld fans for summer; blankets in winter for patron comfort. Profits were ploughed back in – air conditioning, seating, carpet, screens, curtains, chandeliers, and the very expensive digital equipment. In the 1980s the cake shop across the road would bring over their unsold cakes on Saturday. These were shared among the patrons in the evening session. This became a tradition which now continues as free tea/coffee/milo and bickies.

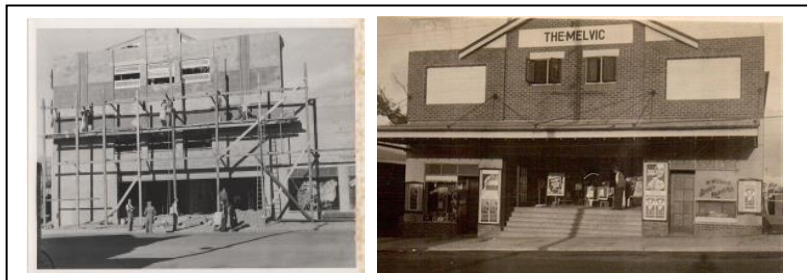
**Thank you to Pat Conroy and staff, kindly supporting our community; and heritage.**

## Melvic Theatre, Belmont.

Written and researched by Bonnie Murdoch

The two Melvic theatres in Belmont made the streets come alive after dark. The joint owners of the Melvic were R.E Sanderson and Mr William (Bill) Payne. Bill Payne started from humble beginnings, his family camped near the lake in the Depression, living largely off prawns, fish, and trapped birds. He worked at Newcastle in later years but still "kept the link with the lake" in his weekend work; a projectionist using carbine lamps at Catherine Hill Bay. His love of movies and theatres probably stemmed from this job.

**The first Melvic** (1928-1938) was constructed on a cow paddock on the eastern side of the Pacific Highway. The Newcastle Sun reported that it had a frontage of 45 feet, and a depth of 128 feet. The brick building had an interior colour scheme of grey and blue pastel. It opened with "The Last Command", a silent romantic drama.



Since there was no road built to Valentine, patrons would row to Belmont Jetty then walk to the theatre. Many would walk from nearby suburbs, some as far as Swansea. After the show they would all walk home again, often at midnight, after a wonderful night out.

Patrons entered through a proscenium arch to watch silent films, accompanied by a pianist, as a form of escape from the Depression. It seated approximately 800 patrons (250 in the dress circle). After an extra row was added tall people had to avoid hitting their head on the ceiling in the last row. The price for the front row was therefore higher as it was the only clear view.

**The second Melvic** was opened on the 21/12/1939 on the corner of Macquarie Street and the Pacific Highway. It was built in 16 weeks from the ground up with decoration done by hand. A good atmosphere was encouraged in the large foyer by a pianist. The upstairs foyer was supplied with flowers by Eric and Ettie Smith and was considered to be the most beautiful in the Newcastle region. The second Melvic was widely recognised as "one of the finest examples of suburban theatre in N.S.W" outside of Sydney.



Bill Payne recognised that they had "exclusive entertainment" rights with the Melvic theatre. There were no hotels open after 6pm, and television or clubs did not exist in Australia. People had permanent bookings on Saturday nights. Where you sat depended on your age or preferences, younger people sat downstairs where the seats were cheaper, while upstairs was quieter with better viewing. "Belmont youth" would visit the milk bar and roll Jaffas down the aisles. This was a tradition for Baby Boomers who could afford to treat lollies as toys. The milk bar also sold fresh fruit juices, hand-dipped chocolate ice creams and more James Henderson brand sweets (minties and fantails).

The Golden Age of Hollywood coincided with the suburban theatre boom. "Gone With the Wind" made more money than BHP did in a year. Bill Payne would advertise the Melvic by dropping leaflets from his light aircraft. This was a special advertisement for the Melbourne Cup footage which he collected from Sydney. Unfortunately, one year the wind changed, and the leaflets ended up floating in the lake.

The second Melvic was successful for 25 years. The introduction of television in 1956 had attendance for suburban theatres fall dramatically. The Melvic's last film was "PT109", about President Kennedy's wartime exploits, on the 31/12/1964. The first Melvic, which was situated near the current newsagent on the highway, was demolished. The second Melvic building now exists as shops and offices at Belmont. Source: LMCC [history.lakemac.com.au](http://history.lakemac.com.au)

## SWANSEA PICTURE HALL

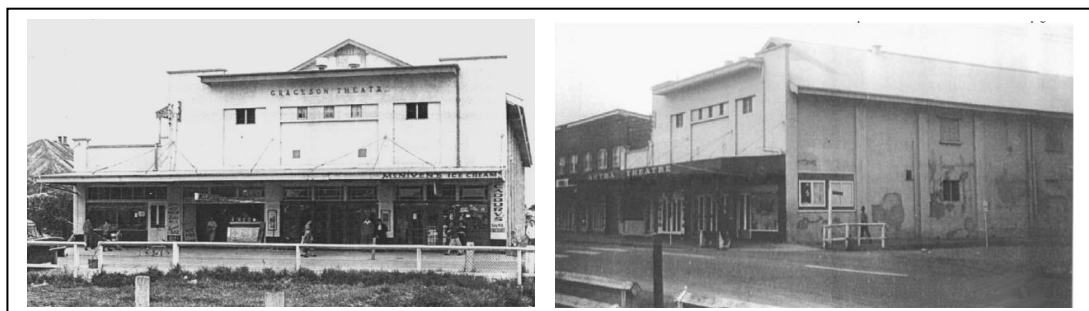
From 1911 John Phelan used smaller premises seating only several hundred rented from James L Boyd, then Douglas Stone, as part of his travelling circuit of venues in the Newcastle and Lake Macquarie areas. George Brockwell and John Fry operated the Swansea Picture Hall from 1919. In 1922 they began renovations, extending the small wooden hall with a tin roof towards the front street. The foyer, now complete with concrete floor, would house a shop on one side, an office on the other, and provide an escape side door.



*Left: Side view of Swansea pictures down Lake Road c.1920.* In 1922 Thomas James Dobinson, a building contractor from Wallsend completed the additions to the building, and leased the business from Brockwell and Fry, buying them out in 1925. Swansea at the time was a small mining and fishing town of only a few 100 residents. The whole Dobinson family worked the various jobs in the theatre – projectionist, usher, ticket seller, cleaner, bouncer - as the turnover was not enough to employ staff. The

1920s was the era of silent movies, with nearly the whole town queuing on Saturday night to watch stars like Charlie Chaplin from hard wooden benches, sound being provided by a pianola. No fancy organs and orchestras, singers, jugglers or magicians out here – they could only be found in the new deluxe city picture palaces. But the theatre thrived. Apart from the hotel, there were no other social venues. Not only were movies shown, but this was the hub of the town's social life. Shows, concerts, magicians, boxing matches, even a lion tamer provided entertainment. Fundraisers and fetes, sports awards presentations were held. The hall doubled as a skating rink. To encourage patrons to attend, lucky door prizes were offered and after a movie night, dances were often held. A bus was chartered to bring people from Catherine Hill Bay. At holiday time the population swelled, mainly by miners taking a well-earned break. The local policeman enjoyed a free seat in the back row in return for keeping an eye on things. Mrs Boon, the Postmistress and Newsagent, spent Saturday afternoon baking pies to be sold at intermission. Admission: Adults 1 shilling; children sixpence.

With growing demand, Dobinson built an entirely new building made of concrete and steel over the old one in 1937. The new theatre was called the "Graceson Theatre" after his daughter Grace and sons. It was able to accommodate 980 seated. A row of shops under an awning occupied the front of the building. To the left of the foyer was A.J. Payne's butcher shop, and F. Caldwell's delicatessen. On the right side was E. Hewitsons Milk Bar.



In 1955 it was sold to the Hughes brothers of Charlestown, and they renamed it the "Astra". In 1970 the building was sold and converted into a retail complex, the Swansea Arcade.

### GRACESON THEATRE RULES:

***If you can't finish your ice-cream, do not place the balance under your chair, it is most unpleasant for the next man's hat.***

***If you must keep your strength up by gorging peanuts, do not flip the shells onto your neighbours.***

***The pianist is quite capable of beating time, therefore there is no occasion for you to stamp your feet on the floor.***

***Do not read aloud the titles of the pictures. Others can read quietly for themselves.***

***If you must kiss your girl in the dark, for heaven's sake do it quietly, not like a horse pulling his foot out of a mud hole.***

**SOURCES:** G. and N. Boyd, *The Changing Face of Swansea's Main Street*; "Front Stalls or Back"; Cathy Graham, UON.



## WEST WALLSEND'S PICTURE PALACES

West Wallsend like many towns was isolated by distance and poor roads. The community provided their own entertainment and ways of socializing, especially when the population grew to c. 6,000 people around 1900 with 4 mines operating. At first the School of Arts seating 500 was the venue for silent movies. Even though the population reduced to nearly 3,000 by 1911



School of Arts

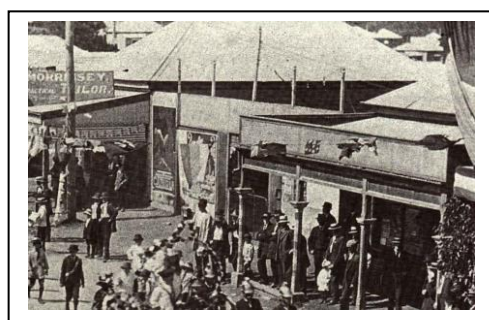


Phelan's

the need for larger and more permanent

premises was recognized, when John Phelan had added Westy to the many towns he visited with "**Phelan's New Huge Electric Biograph Show**". The site he chose for "Phelan's Electric Play Theatre" was 64 Carrington St. The high front wall was constructed with flat iron sheeting and covered with posters; and a wire gate which led to a ticket office. The seating sloped down towards the back which was flat and doubled as a skating rink. This section had a

corrugated iron roof, and a wooden floor. The street end had a dirt floor and no roof, but contained the reserved padded back stalls, known as "the Gods". As the silent movies were sub-titled and many people were semi-literate, they grouped around a reader, sitting on wooden benches. A piano player came on the 6pm tram from Wallsend to provide sound and mood music according to what he felt was suitable; and left on the 11 o'clock tram. Admission was One Shilling (10c) for adults; sixpence (5c) for children. Children were usually given a shilling to go to the movies, which left them with sixpence for plenty of lollies and treats.



In 1920 Rex Charters bought the theatre and completed the roofing and wooden floor. 1921 Ernie Lowe entered the business which became "**Strand Pictures Ltd**", seating for 1,000. The walls were not lined until c.1926 with the arrival of talkies needing soundproofing with asbestos material. The pianist gave way to a phonograph and large speaker. A brick projection box was built because the nitrate film was highly inflammable. It was accessed by a ladder. The projectionist was usually the undertaker; the bouncers were the town's firemen. The shop next

door did a roaring trade selling up to 24 dozen ice blocks, lemon squashes, milk shakes and pies at the interval. With the advent of TV the numbers declined and The Strand closed in March 1964; and was demolished in 1970.

Jabez Mackey's father had a travelling caravan which toured around showing pictures in halls, like Phelan. Using the Museum Hall behind the Museum Hotel at first, Mackey and Peters, noted the opportunity for another theatre and decided to build their own picture show theatre on the corner of Laidley and Carrington Streets in 1912 – the open-air **Picture Palace**. It also had a dirt floor; the upright supports were bush poles sunk into the ground;



Museum Hotel

with galvanized walls. Carbon arc lamps were used for lighting. The cinematograph was hand operated with a crank handle, whilst a violinist and pianist provided the sound. Mackey's mother made ice cream in a churn and sold tickets. On the first night it poured rain, and the patrons watched holding up their umbrellas. On the eve of WWI in 1914, the Holmesville Hall, was also used for movies, and Ernie Lowe would exchange reels of film during the interval, riding between the 2 venues on his motor bike. Sadly, as time went by 2 picture palaces proved to be too many, and it was sold to Ernie Lowe, who went on to manage The Strand, and show movies in many other small local towns. Sources: LMCC; "History of the Former Strand Cinema"; "Front Stalls or Back?"