

# CANON CINEMA ABINGTON SQUARE, NORTHAMPTON

*A Report on the Intrinsic and Relative Interest of a  
Cinema Built in 1936, for Public Inquiry*

*by*

Susie Barson

Historical Analysis & Research Team  
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## CANNON CINEMA, ABINGTON SQUARE, NORTHAMPTON

The Savoy cinema and shops complex was built in 1936 for the Associated British Cinemas to the designs of W.R. Glen, the in-house architect and cinema specialist. It was listed in 1994, at grade II, as a special example of a complete 1930s interior and a rare survival of the work of W.R. Glen. It is the only Glen cinema that is listed, although the listed Forum, Liverpool, (1931) by A. E. Shennan, has much input by Glen in the interior decoration. The owners of the Cannon wish to remove the balcony from the auditorium to make more space for the suspension of objects as part of a themed pub. Carol Pyrah, inspector for the East Midlands team, requested some background information on the work and importance of cinemas designed by W.R. Glen, how this one fits in to his *oeuvre*, and the rarity of interiors such as this, to help prepare her proof of evidence for an inquiry to take place in November 1998.

### The quality and interest of the original building

The Cannon cinema was originally called the Savoy and was built for the ABC chain or 'circuit' of cinemas. The ABC circuit of cinemas was the creation, in 1928, of a Scottish solicitor John Maxwell. As chairman and managing director of the Company until his death in 1940, Maxwell was responsible for an intensive building programme that saw over 100 cinemas opened. Some of these were conversions of existing picture houses or halls but the majority were new and purpose-built to the designs of the company architect William Riddle Glen (1884-1950). Glen had cut his teeth designing cinemas in Scotland with his partner Albert Gardner between 1919 and 1929, when he was appointed architect for ABC. The peak of his output was in the years 1936 and 1937, around the time which the volume of work necessitated the employment of assistants. Most of the cinemas were built for around 2,000 patrons, relatively large, and luxurious enough to be termed 'super cinemas'. Maxwell wished the ABC houses to be comfortable, well-lit, well-heated and ventilated; the style and decor he left up to the architect.

At the time considered unusually large and imposing by the cinema press, the new luxury 'super cinema' for Northampton, the Savoy, was prominently sited by Glen at the corner of Abington Street and Lower Mounts, with the main entrance on the corner flanked by lower wings for four shops. When completed, the building was written up in *The Ideal Kinema*, published on May 14th 1936, and this provides a useful source for understanding the original building.

As regards the design of the exterior, the author of the article noted 'something new' in the design of the facade: 'Four vertical fins outlined by neon at nighttime are placed between two outside fins against a plain background of terrazzo.' Unfortunately these fins have been truncated and lower flanking projecting curved corners to above the entrance canopy, at the junction with the flat shop wings have gone. The canopy, too, has been replaced, and the decorative metal work in the doors and the poster display surrounds have been removed. But this central frontispiece would have seemed the *dernier cri* in cinema design, echoing the curved, sleek style and projecting illuminating tower fins of the Odeon, Colwyn Bay designed by Harry W. Weedon and opened in the same month, and ultimately recalling the Titania-Palast in Germany (1928), the font of inspiration for the cinema architects of the

1930s. Vertical fins were used by Glen at the Ritz, Leytonstone, also of 1936.

Film-goers passed through five sets of swing doors before congregating in a spacious entrance hall, 'a regular feature of all the latest A.B.C. houses'. In the hall was a wide staircase down to the stalls. Steps also led up the the balcony foyer, from where patrons could view the crowd in the hall: this arrangement was common to many Glen-designed cinemas. With a decorated beam overhead, the hall ceiling had extra support from three illuminated columns. The colour scheme was in 'autumnal tints' and the floor finished in a combination of terrazzo and marble. (A similar decorative scheme 'devised by Mr Glen' was used at the Savoy, Croydon, opened just a few months earlier in March, 1936). Patrons could be informed about at the coming attractions on posters set in stainless steel frames made by Coltmans of Hounslow, a specialist firm that did most of the ABC display frames.

### **The decor**

The decor in the foyers consisted of a pile carpet in a jazzy fan-shaped design in green, pink, beige and black, supplied by Hall and Dixon, Glen's usual cinema furnishing firm based in London. Indirect lighting in small alcoves and pendant lighting was provided by Best and Lloyd from Birmingham. Glen usually used F.H. Pride from London, but in this case it was deliberate policy to employ a Midlands firm. The general contractors for the job, A. Glenn and Sons, and Scudmore and Tuck, asphalters, were both Northampton-based firms. The Mayor noted proudly in his opening speech that there had been 'a use of local labour and brains'. In the auditorium, Glen's favoured decorators Clark and Fenn from London carried out all the decoration, in shades of brown, red and gold. The ceiling contained an oblong shape with concealed lighting around it. The proscenium arch was flanked with decorative 'jazz moderne' ventilation grilles made by Garton and Thorne of Camden in London. These grilles were characteristic of a Glen interior, although hitherto he usually had curves and scrolls: these were unusually angular and abstract. The chairs, upholstered in 'rose moquette' were supplied by H. Morris and Co. of Glasgow, presumably a firm previously used by Glen when he practised in Scotland. All this survives, incredibly even some of the seating. The auditorium originally seated nearly 2000 people, 1250 in the stalls and 700 in the circle. Long gone, though, are the stage curtains of rich gold satin, embellished with a floral design, which made a striking background to the illuminated console of the Compton organ, sadly also removed in 1960.

### **Planning**

At Northampton, several characteristic features of Glen's planning were used: the siting of the projection room and ventilation chamber on the roof to reduce the hazard of fire, the clear passage of patrons from foyer to auditorium with no deflections and long winding corridors, spacious foyers, and the use of levels within the foyer and auditorium. Although some of the detail has gone from the interior at Northampton, the architecture itself remains and this is what really distinguishes it: the dramatic transformation of a flat, vertical plane seamlessly following a curve into a horizontal plane; the use of various levels (landings, steps and balconies), both in the foyer and in the auditorium, the sweep of lines and curves traversing the whole space in a giddy swirl of movement that would have excited and thrilled an audience, many of whom had first seen films in re-used

theatres and music halls. This confident handling of a large space must have seemed fantastically progressive to those early audiences. As Richard Gray states in his recent book *Cinemas in Britain* (1996): 'Glen came into his own when designing the interiors of his cinemas. His planning and handling of interior volume had great fluency...he was particularly adept at foyers... Access to the stalls would be down wide steps in between symmetrical flights of stairs to the balcony.' This split-level arrangement was unique to Glen.

### **The characteristics and importance of Glen's work in inter-war cinema design**

By 1936 Associated British Cinemas had grown rapidly since its beginning in 1929 with only a small number (c.40-50) of 'houses' to one of the largest cinema circuits in Britain, controlling around 300 cinemas. William Glen's first project was the Ritz in Edinburgh of 1926, with Albert Gardner, a rather stolid, boxey affair. At the Forum, Birmingham Glen carried out a reconstruction of a masonic hall, with an elaborate and scrolled auditorium. It was not until 1932, at the Savoy, Wandsworth, that the crisper, cleaner Art Deco lines appeared. This cinema was demolished in 1960. The Ritz in Leeds (1934) showed Glen's penchant for decorative grille work on the splayed walls flanking the proscenium. But it was in 1935 that the Glen style really matured, with the Forum, Southampton (scalloped edged planes stepped down in the ceiling and concealed lighting), and at the Regal, Wakefield. The cinemas that followed in 1936 and 1937 shared Glen's characteristic features, each building having high wide foyers, steps up and down to the stalls and the balcony, the concealed alcove and trough lighting, the smooth, sweeping lines, stepped ceilings with concealed illumination. The Northampton Savoy was right in the heart of this creative and inventive output.

This flurry of construction trailed off with the death of Maxwell in 1940 and the decrease in building after the Second World War. Glen himself died in 1950 aged 65 years old, having designed nearly 100 cinemas in Britain for the Associated British Cinemas company. In England forty-three cinemas from the Glen office survive in some form but with various degrees of alteration. Twenty-four have been demolished, including the excellent Regal, Wembley. The best survivors are Liverpool, Northampton and Halifax. Richard Gray is currently assessing the 'listability' of some of these buildings, alongside survivors by the other great cinema architects, W. Trent, G. Coles, H. Weedon and his office (Cecil Clavering, Robert Bullivent) and F.E. Bromidge. Glen was a major interwar specialist cinema architect and his reputation is equal to that of anyone else practising at the time.

### **The importance of the survival of the Cannon cinema and the features within it.**

When the Savoy in Northampton was opened by the M.P. for Northampton Sir Mervyn Manningham Buler, he praised the building as 'a fine example of contemporary Kinema design'. It was the first super cinema to be built in the town for many years, an 'all British enterprise using local labour and brains.' He continued: 'Mr Glen the architect has provided a Kinema of which the City could be thoroughly proud.'

Somewhere along the line this pride and joy in, and respect for, cinemas has got lost, and

the buildings impoverished by changes in entertainment and leisure, with many complete and thorough-going interiors stripped out for fashionable refurbishment as pubs, discos and bingo halls.

Shells of cinemas are common; fine interiors much rarer and fine exteriors and interiors rarer still, as we have seen from the above list of losses.

The Cannon cinema, formerly the Savoy, has not escaped damaging alteration to the exterior but most of the architectural features of the interior survive. They now face risk of further erosion. The importance of the balcony lies in the fact that cantilevered balconies were an integral part of all Glen's auditoria; they themselves formed part of the architectural scheme with their sweeping curves, and they provided the perfect vantage point from which to survey and appreciate the ceiling, wall and proscenium decoration. The best seats were in the front circle, and the auditorium was designed to be viewed from that level. Removal of the balcony would leave exposed vast areas of wall that were not part of the scheme, and a perceptible vacuum. The survival of the balcony within a complete interior was part of the reason for listing the building in 1994; it should be allowed to stay, even with a new use for the building.

Susie Barson  
HART  
October 1998.

#### SOURCES

*Ideal Kinema* May 1936, Sept 1936

*Cinemas in Britain* by Richard Gray, Lund Humphries 1996

Allan Eyles *ABC First Name in Entertainment* 1994

Malcolm Webb *The Amber Valley Gazeteer of Greater London's Suburban Cinemas*  
1986

**Illustrations of the Savoy Northampton:** entrance hall, auditorium, circle foyer, and exterior from *The Ideal Kinema* May 14 1936.

## **SURVIVING CINEMAS BY W.R. GLEN**

Brighton, Savoy 1930 Interior altered.  
Birmingham, Forum 1930 Now retail premises, interior much altered.  
Liverpool, Forum 1931 with A E Shennan Listed grade II. Disused.  
London Elephant and Castle Theatre 1932 Triple screen cinema, interior no longer extant.  
Leeds, Ritz 1934 Twin cinema, interior no longer extant.  
Wakefield, Regal 1935 Triple screen cinema.  
Southampton, Forum 1935 Disused.  
London, Savoy, Stoke Newington 1936 Interior altered, lower part retail, upper levels derelict.  
London, Hackney, Regal 1936 Snooker hall  
London, Savoy, Croydon 1936 Interior altered. Triple screen.  
London, Regal, Hammersmith 1936 Interior altered. Triple screen.  
Northampton, Savoy 1936 Triple screen cinema.  
Chesterfield, Regal 1936 Closed.  
Leicester, Savoy 1937 Twin screen.  
Essex, Regal, Ilford 1937 Now a disused nightclub.  
London, Savoy, Holloway Road. Pub, interior survives.  
London, Regal, Harrow Road, Paddington  
Bournemouth, Westover 1937 Double screen cinema.  
Swindon, Savoy 1937 Derelict.  
Sunderland Ritz 1937 Twin screen cinema.  
Salisbury Regal 1937 Bingo hall  
Portsmouth Savoy 1937 Triple screen cinema  
Grimsby Regal 1937 Triple screen cinema..  
Essex, Ritz, Romford 1938 Interior altered.  
Luton, Savoy 1938 Triple screen cinema.  
Rochdale, Regal 1938 Bingo hall.  
Walsall, Savoy 1938 Triple screen cinema.  
Essex, Romford, Ritz 1938 Triple screen cinema.  
London, Regal, Streatham 1938 Good exterior; interior altered but foyer survives.  
Possible candidate for listing.  
Plymouth, Royal 1938 Bingo/cinema use, altered.  
Leigh, Gtr Manchester, Regal 1938 Derelict.  
London, Leyton Ritz, 1938, supermarket.  
Levenshulme, Gtr Manchester, Regal 1937 Bowling alley.  
Wolverhampton, Savoy 1937 Disused.  
Birkenhead, Savoy 1938 snooker club.  
Halifax, Regal 1938 Triple screen cinema but little altered. Candidate for listing.  
Chatham Regent 1938 Triple screen cinema.  
Nottingham, Carlton 1939 Triple screen cinema.  
London, Empire, Mile End Road 1939 Commercial premises; derelict; interior not yet inspected.  
Staines, Regal 1939 Triple screen cinema.  
London, Regal, Woolwich begun 1939 Nightclub, mostly post-war.  
London, Holloway, Savoy 1940 Snooker hall

Bristol, Bedminster, Rex 1940 Bingo hall

Total : 43 Allan Eyles has seen this list and wants it known that MOST of these interiors have been seriously compromised or effectively lost: they do not comprise a significant stock of cinema interiors by Glen. In a letter to English Heritage, Mr Eyles states: 'The only major Glen auditorium to survive in anywhere near comparable form, by all accounts is the regal Halifax. Glen's Savoy, Stoke Newington and the Empire, Mile End Road both had fine interiors, they are not listed, and have been allowed to decay seriously through disuse or misuse.'

In sum, the listed Liverpool Forum, the listed Northampton Cannon and the unlisted Halifax Regal are considered by cinema-building experts Elaine Harwood, Richard Gray and Allan Eyles as the best surviving examples of the entire surviving stock.

### **DEMOLISHED CINEMAS BY W.R.GLEN**

London, Savoy, Wandsworth 1932  
Coventry, Empire 1933  
Torquay Regal 1933  
London, Regal, Mare St., Hackney 1936  
London, Ritz, Muswell Hill 1936  
Lincoln, Savoy 1936  
Exeter, Savoy 1936  
London, Rex, Leytonstone 1936  
London, Regal, Old Kent Road 1937  
London, Regal, Staines Road, Hounslow 1937  
London, Regal, Wembley 1937  
London, Regal, Putney 1937  
London, Savoy, Teddington 1937  
Harrogate Regal 1937  
York Regal 1937  
Southport, Regal 1938  
Knotty Ash, Regent 1938  
Huddersfield, Ritz  
Derby Regal 1938  
London, Ritz, Clapton, Hackney 1939  
London Twickenham Regal 1939  
Aston, Gaiety 1939  
Cheltenham Regal 1939  
Bradford Ritz 1939

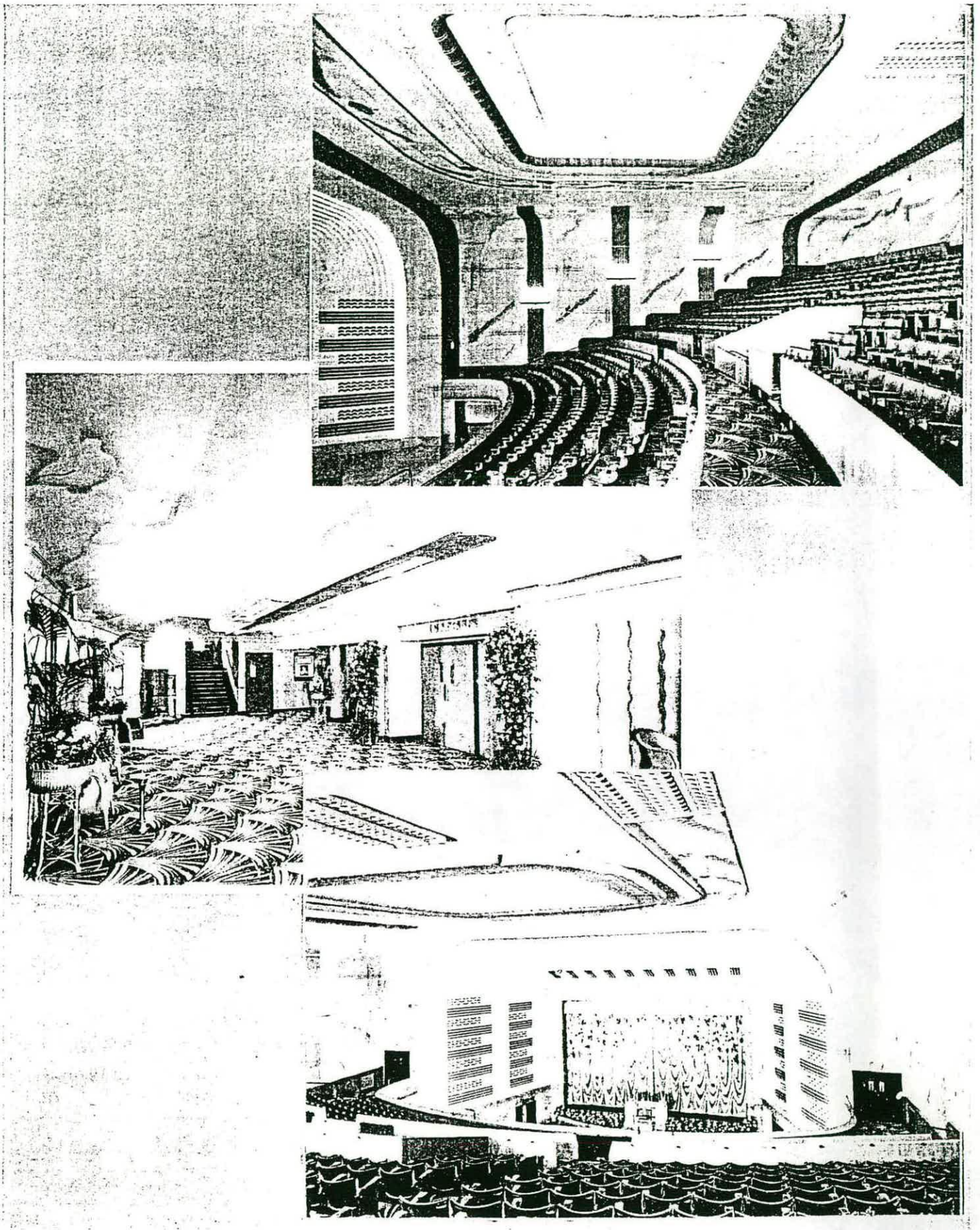
Total: 24



*Front elevation of the Savoy, Northampton. Architect :  
W. R. Glen, F.R.I.A.S.*







A.B.C.'s latest kinema, the Savoy, Northampton, has a distinct note of gaiety in its interior. An illustration of the entrance vestibule may be seen on page 1. W. R. Glen, F.R.I.A.S., was responsible for the design