

BUILDING RECORDING
AT THE
ZIG ZAG CLUB / ST JOHNS
CINEMA,
77, ST JOHNS,
WORCESTER

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17 March 2008

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Project 3145
Report 1617
WCM 101641

Zig Zag Club / St John's Cinema, 77 St Johns, Worcester

These notes are complementary to the short study of the cinema carried out by Pat Hughes (Hughes 2008).

St John's Cinema was constructed in 1914 by two brothers, Alfred and Harry Godsall. It was constructed on the site of The King's Head pub, which was a hall and cross-wing building on the St John's street frontage opposite the St John's Green (now Bransford Road) junction with Malvern Road. St John's Cinema was reportedly the first purpose-built cinema to be constructed in Worcester (Hughes 2008).

The building was quite richly decorated on its street frontage. It had a bow window above the entrance, a semi circular window above that and plaster swags above oval windows that flanked the bow. Above the semi-circular window was a decorative gable and a dentiled eaves cornice surmounted the top of the building. From this frontage the roof of the building sloped gradually back to the rear of the property where the cinema screen was located. Figure 1 shows the frontage in 1920 when it was showing 'The Capitol' with Leah Baird.



Figure 1: St John's Cinema in 1920



Figure 2: St John's Cinema in 1954

In 1927 the building had its frontage raised as Dr Hughes has discussed. This allowed galleried seating to be inserted. The front of the gallery was curved towards the sidewalls and the seating raked steeply towards the screen at the rear of the building. It is interesting to note that even with the added seating, the projection box stayed on the ground floor (WRO 496.5 BA 10465 No 5430). This increased occupation was just in time for the advent of talkies and the cinema obtained the first talkie to be showed in Worcester in 1929 – Al Jolson's 'The Singing Fool' (Adams 1997).

In 1936, new proposals were put forward to almost completely rebuild the cinema (WRO 496.5 BA 10465/59 No 6630). This appears not to have taken place as the exterior of the building was not at all like the proposed plans even in 1954 when it

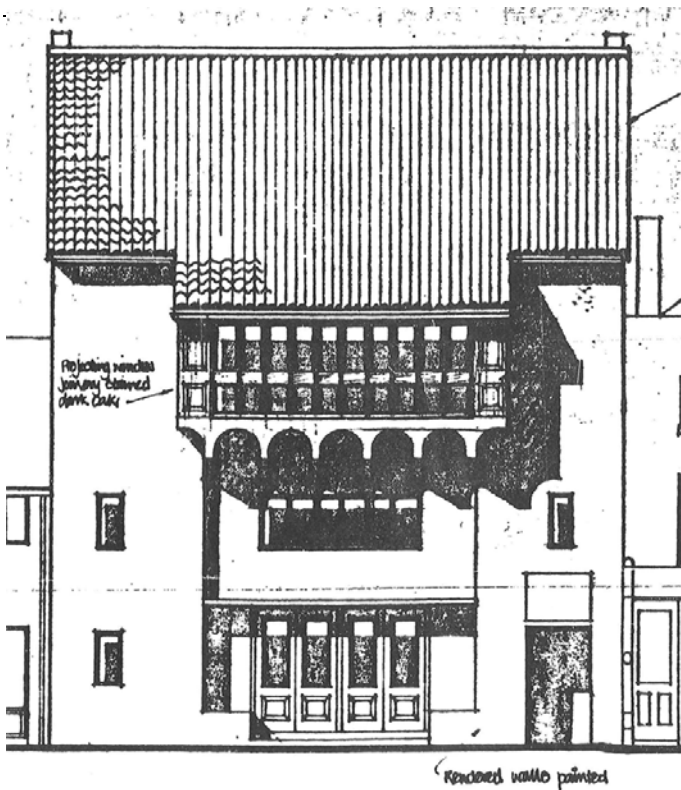


Figure 3: proposed 1978 St John's elevation for Tanya's Nightclub by Henry Gorst

was showing 'The Quiet Woman' with Michael Balfour and Dora Bryan (Figure 2). The plans drawn up by Henry Gorst in 1978, for the proposal to convert the building into a nightclub, show a layout very similar to that of 1927 and the surviving interior still resembled these plans at the time of recording the building in February 2008.

The Godsall brothers sold the cinema in 1939 to the Odeon chain as their Foregate Street branch had been requisitioned to keep large aircraft parts in during the war while it was still under construction and only an empty shell. Mrs Ethel Pearman, daughter of Harry Godsall, said that it had been going downhill a lot by this time and that there had been a fire at some point prior to the sale (Adams 1997).

Under Odeon ownership the cinema expanded its facilities into the adjacent property (no 69) around 1947. This caused little change to the layout of the original

building but added toilets to each floor and offices in 69 St Johns. Certainly by this time the St Johns elevation had been remodelled as the bow window is not shown on the planning drawings for these changes (WRO 496.5 BA 10465 No 8340). The decorative plasterwork and bow window were removed leaving a simpler style of architecture that became a feature of post-war Britain (Figure 2).

In 1952, after the City Odeon was opened in 1950, it was taken over by Miles Byrne, owner of Hereford County Theatre, and a gala opening performance was held, attended by renowned British film star Anne Crawford (WEN 1952). By 1954 it was known as St John's Theatre, as the signage on the St John's elevation shows when it was pictured at the time it was showing 'The Quiet Woman' (Figure 2). The increase of television usage throughout the 1950s saw cinema attendance numbers steadily drop such that Worcester could not sustain all of its 5 or more cinemas. St John's closed as a cinema in June



Figure 4: Zig Zag's fire in May 2007



Figure 5: Zig Zags after demolition in March 2008

1959. It then stood vacant for 20 years.

The Worcester Evening News photographed it in 1976 looking very derelict (WRO PSR No 53101). As well as the St John's Theatre sign, there was a sign above this saying 'A Miles Byrne Theatre'. In 1977, a builder bought the cinema and put in a planning application to turn the building into a nightclub and restaurant. Henry Gorst produced plans in 1978 (WCPD 1979; Figure 3; Hughes 2008, Figures 7a-g), planning permission was given in 1979 and the stripping out of the building also started in that year. The cinema fixtures and fittings must have

been very much intact within the building as the stripping was still taking place in April 1980 when the Berrows Journal photographed the work (WRO PSR No 55274). Even by this time there were still the remains of decorative plaster panels on the walls and the curved frontage of the balcony was still visible.

The conversion involved completely removing all of the cinema furniture and reducing the building to a shell of four walls, with rooms immediately behind the street elevation, before it could be turned into a nightclub. The nightclub layout appeared to leave the large open area downstairs and the projection room became a cloakroom. The 1940s toilets on the first floor (the small windows above the entrance) were also left intact and a mock 16th century jettied window was added to the second floor (Figure 3). This was probably the restaurant part of the original 1979 plans.

On 24th February 1987, just around 6 years after opening as Tanya's Nightclub, the building was devastated by a fire set by an arsonist. It closed the nightclub and resulted in over £¼ millions pounds worth of damage (WRO PSR No 633626).

The nightclub was refurbished and reopened and since 1987 has had numerous owners and names, including Tanya's, Passion and Pain, Picasso's, Club Pic and Zig Zags, which was its last incarnation. Zig Zags closed in 1998. Sainsbury's bought the building, and the land behind, in 2000. Since then, there have been three fires, on 12th December 2002, 17th April 2004 and 31st May 2007 (WEN 2002, 2004, 2007). This last fire caused part of the building to collapse (Figure 4; Appendix 3). As a result it became structurally unsound and had to be partially demolished in early 2008. The main frontage is the only part still surviving although the top floor has been lost (Figure 5).



Figure 6: St John's Theatre sign within jetty bracket scars

Following the partial demolition of the building, a photographic survey was carried out (Appendix 1). This recorded aspects of the building that had survived the fire and had been revealed by the

demolition of the nightclub fabric. The most significant of these was the 1950s St John's Theatre painted sign as shown on Figure 2. This had been covered by the brackets of the mock-jettied window and revealed when this feature was removed (Figure 6). It is possible that



Figure 7: Possible marks from stalls seating of St John's Cinema

the rest of the sign may be recoverable from behind the paint on this frontage.

What was also revealed were some unusual paint marks on the walls on the ground floor of the building. These can be identified with the cinema stalls setting and are therefore possibly the last surviving part of the original

cinema. It is recorded by Joyce and Gloria Green that when Odeon took over the cinema, they replaced a lot of the old seats 'but not the nine pennies and shillings down at the front' (Adams 1997). It is in this position that the marks on the walls can be seen and they were obviously hidden behind the later plasterwork and wallpaper of the c1980 nightclub and subsequent clubs (Figure 7).

Abbreviations and Bibliography

WCPD – Worcester City Planning Department

WEN – Worcester Evening News

WRO – Worcestershire Record Office

WRO PSR – Worcestershire Record Office Photographic Survey Register

Adams, P M., 1997 *Memories of St John's, Worcester*

Hughes, P., 2008 *St John's Cinema: development and use, 1914 to 1980*, unpublished document dated January 2008

Appendix 1 Photographic Survey February 2008

































Appendix 2 Photographs from client

(following the fire of 31 May 2007)









Appendix 3 Photographs from BBC Hereford
and Worcester website

(from:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/herefordandworcester/content/image_galleries/st_johns_fire_gallery.shtml

accessed 18 February 2008)





