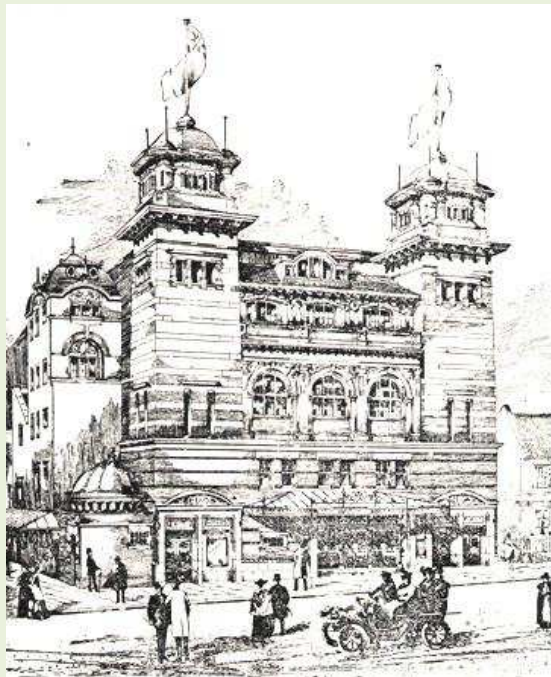


# The Walthamstow Palace



The *Walthamstow Palace* was opened on the 28<sup>th</sup> December 1903 with *Fred Karno's Company in Jail Birds'* and colloquially it was known as the 'Aunty Alice' (Cockney rhyming slang) It was built by *Wylson and Long* who also built Palace theatres at Tottenham, Chelsea and East Ham, and it was designed by the same architects.

## The Walthamstow Palace Theatre

The building had twin towers on each end of its facade, which was built in red brick and Bath stone, designed in an English Renaissance style. In all, the theatre could seat 1625 patrons. The auditorium had seating provided for 267 in the stalls, 390 in the pit-stalls, 352 in the dress circle, 600 in the gallery and two boxes (one above each other) on each side of the proscenium which seated a total of 16 in all four boxes. The proscenium was 30 feet wide, the stage was 25 feet deep and there were eight dressing rooms with stalls, a pit and a balcony. The balcony was wired off gallery to prevent patrons from dropping stuff on to people in the more expensive seats. There was also a bioscope box so that early films could be screened.

## The Circuits.



Every week, Music Halls presented new performances with a new set of artistes, who travelled around the UK performing at different theatres. It was twelve to eighteen months before the artistes completed a circuit and in this way the artistes were able to keep their own acts 'fresh' to each new audience.

There were three different circuits with circuit number 1 having the 'best' artistes and theatres. Circuits 2 & 3 had lesser known artistes who were either working their way up the ladder or who were coming down the ladder. In addition to this, there were groups of theatres that were owned by the same person or group of people that formed their own circuits.

The *Walthamstow Palace* was on part of a circuit of theatres owned by **Joseph Davis, Henry Gros, George Adney Payne and Henry Tozer** who also owned 'Palaces' at East Ham, Tottenham, Chelsea and Walthamstow, a 'Hippodrome' at Ilford, an 'Empress' at Brixton and an 'Empire' at Shepherds Bush. The *Walthamstow Palace Theatre* was on the national number 3 circuit

Picture left – The Walthamstow Palace Theatre in its heyday

## 'Running Order' & The Artistes

There were generally, two performances on weekdays and three on Saturday when there was an afternoon matinee performance. Each performance followed a format. There were one or two 'headline' acts and a number of lesser supporting acts. Most performances included a comedian or comedy acts and various speciality acts. These included exotic dancers, jugglers, tumblers and animal acts. The musical acts were supported by the pit orchestra. In the early years, as cinema was still a novelty, shows at the *Walthamstow Palace Theatre* almost always included a Bioscope showing of a short piece of film.



In 1904, one show comprised:

Mixed programme for the Overture ; *Cribb & Cribb* ; *Edmunda* ; *Mr. Will Dalton* ; *Princess Pauline* ; *Mr. Charles Freeman & Miss Florence Tench* ; *Mr. Wm. Gourlay* ; *Miss Kate Carney* ; *Ruffell's Imperial bioscope* .

Note: **Kate Carney** was a well known singer of cockney songs and was known as the 'Coster Comedienne' You can hear her on: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2R7X3KhbJpl>

Picture left: The 'Palace' on the left, the Carlton Cinema on the right, the spire of Marsh St Congregationalist church at the back left side.



In 1914, one show comprised:

Mixed programme for the Overture ; *May O'Connor* ; *Harry Huley and Bessie Bent* ; *A.W. Baskcomb* ; the *Four Sydney Girls* ; *Leo Dryden* ; *Chas. Dent* ; *Violet Shelley Trio* ; *Naughton and Gold* ; *Betty Barclay* ; *Palace Bioscope*

Note: *Naughton and Gold* were a comedy double act, consisting of *Charlie Naughton* and *Jimmy Gold* who became famous as the *Crazy Gang*. You can hear them on : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxqmAOjTcHK>

In 1934 one show comprised:

1. *The Huntings* ...amusing performers in a series of ladder antics



2 . *Pant & Rosslyn* .... the famous comedy pair in a typical topical interlude

3 . *Joan Gates* .... the dainty soubrette in her latest successes

4 . *O'Brien & Harris* .... the "iro-lanks" comedy pair presenting an amusing diversion

5 . *The famous flying Julians* ....springing surprises as only these brilliant artistes can

**Intermission**

6 .*Horace Goldin* ....the royal illusionist presents a goldin hour

You can see the video of the *Flying Julians* at:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIIRMqsSsNs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIIRMqsSsNs)

## A Roll Call Of The Famous Names Of British Music Hall

The list of artistes who appeared at the *Walthamstow Palace* is like a roll call of most of the famous names of British music hall. These include; little *Charley Chaplin* with the *Fred Karno company*, the sand-dancing *Wilson, Keppel & Betty*, *Harry Lauder* - with his crooked stick, *Marie Lloyd* - mistress of the double entendre, *Gus Elen* – cockney comedian and singer, *Gertie Gitana* - the Staffordshire Cinderella, *Eugene Stratton* – the American ‘blacked-up’ minstrel singer, *Harry Champion* – the Cockney comedian and singer who is much admired by *Chas & Dave*, *G.H. Elliot* – another ‘blacked-up’ singer, *Issy Bonn* – a British Jewish comedian and singer, *Gypsy Rose Lee* – the ‘artistic’ stripper, *Morcombe and Wise* (*Ernie Wise* recollects their act as going down stupendously badly!) the lugubrious *Tony Hancock*, effervescent *Dickie Henderson* (Himself, the son of a music hall artiste) *Harry Secombe*, later to become famous as the singing ‘Goon’ and *Julie Andrews* as a young girl with her Mum and Dad.

As a music hall fan, of these, one of my favourite all time music hall artistes was *Gus Elen*. He sang and recited Cockney songs that include the immortal song ‘*If it wasn’t for the ‘ouses in between*’. Hear it on: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1GmDA8FU9w>



It contains a chorus that goes

‘Oh it really is a verry pretty garden ;  
And Chingford to the eastward could be seen;  
Wiv a ladder and some glasses,  
You could see to ‘Ackney Marshes,  
If it wasn't for the 'ouses in between.

Left- *Gus Elen (1862-1940)*

## The Paying Public



The image left is of a 1948 advertising poster for the *Walthamstow Palace*. One of the top billed acts is for singer *Betty Driver*. She became famous in later years for her long running television work in *Coronation Street*.

The *Walthamstow Palace* Theatre was a major source of entertainment for *Walthamstow* residents.

*Val Terry Brown* remembers: ‘If it were live theatre you were after, the *Palace* Theatre put on top class performances before the days of telly. Dad liked the eccentric dancers such as *Jo, Jac and Jonni*, or *Wilson, Keppel and Betty*. *Jane* and her nude calendar tableaux were popular and permissible provided she did not move while on stage’



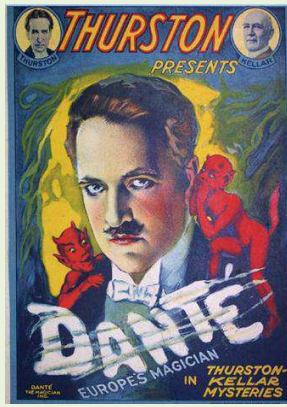
<http://www.walthamstowmemories.net/pdfs/Val%20Terry%20Brown.pdf>

The situation was that it was legal to show nudes providing that the presentation depicted ‘art’ and that the participants didn’t move. So, theatre managers showed nude ‘tableaux vivants’ (A French term meaning living pictures) that were often cleverly lit and were presented as ‘art’ and not eroticism! Perhaps I was culturally ignorant, as it was a distinction completely lost to me and my mates when we went to the *Finsbury Park Empire* and saw nude tableaux and so called artistic dancers like *Gypsy Rose Lee* taking their off their clothes



Mick Gilbey writes: <http://micksmuses.com/category/memories/walthamstow/>

Further down the High Street where Palace Parade now stands was the huge and towering edifice of the Walthamstow Palace. This was Walthamstow's own theatre which had seen better days. I was normally taken there by my mother during the pantomime season to watch a production. It always seemed to me that foreigners must have thought the English a very strange people with male actors dressing up as women and vice versa in a pantomime. I also recall seeing a production of a play called the Black Narcissus. The auditorium of the Palace Theatre was large but I always thought this monolith of a building looked a bit ominous when silhouetted against the skyline.



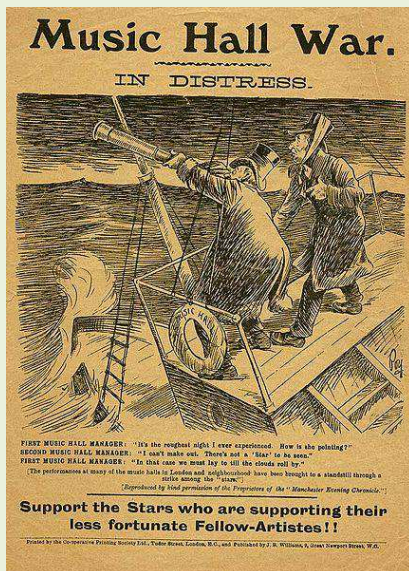
John Buck writes: 'Maybe some readers may be interested in my recollections of the Walthamstow Palace, to which I was taken sometimes by my parents when I was growing up in the 1930s. Among the performers that I remember were Dickie Henderson, Vic Oliver, Leslie Henson and Julie Andrews as a young girl with her Mum and Dad. I seem to remember going to a circus there and I certainly remember a truly spectacular magic show by "The Great Dante" who had a large company of male and female assistants. You can see a film of him sawing a woman in half in absolutely amazing style if you google "Dante the Magician" Another remarkable act was Martin Taubman with his "Electronde", one of the earliest electronic musical instruments, which he played just by moving his hand to and fro in front of an antenna. You can see him too by googling "Electronde + Taubman" or "Electronde + British Pathe". We always sat in the seats called "the fauteuils" which was just the theatre's posh name for the Stalls, which made me feel very superior to the people in the Pit (horrible little snob that I was). I also saw one or two plays when the Countess de la Marr took over

the theatre after the war, but the audience at these was so sparse that one felt very sorry for the actors having to play before such an empty theatre' <http://www.walthamstowmemories.net/html/postbag13.html>

Maureen Shanks remembers on: [http://www.francisfrith.com/walthamstow/memories/Wars-years-and-afterwards\\_367711/](http://www.francisfrith.com/walthamstow/memories/Wars-years-and-afterwards_367711/) I remember the Palace Theatre where for 6d (six old pennies) we could watch Pantomimes sitting in the Gods.

Ron Parker writes on Richard Dunn's excellent Walthamstow History site: <http://www.walthamstowhistory.com/ym2006.htm> 'Seeing Harry Secombe before he became famous with the Goons, doing his hilarious shaving routine at the Palace in 1946'

## The 1907 Music Hall Strike



In January 1907, members of the newly formed *Variety Artistes Federation* (Now incorporated with *Equity*) together with the *National Association of Theatrical Employees* and the *Amalgamated Musicians Union* went on strike for union recognition, better pay and conditions. The dispute was funded by wealthy performers including Marie Lloyd and Gus Elen. To raise spirits, Lloyd often performed on picket lines and took part in a fundraising performance at the Scala Theatre. Marie Lloyd explained her advocacy: "We the stars can dictate our own terms. We are fighting not for ourselves, but for the poorer members of the profession, earning thirty shillings to £3 a week. For this they have to do double turns, and now matinées have been added as well. These poor things have been compelled to submit to unfair terms of employment, and I mean to back up the federation in whatever steps are taken."

The strike closed theatres, including the *Walthamstow Palace*, all over London and the provinces. Artistes picketed the theatres and 'headline' stars 'busked' in the streets. The strike was called off on the 9<sup>th</sup> February when the theatre owners officially recognized the union.

## The Years Of Decline



In the post war years, the growth of cinema in the 1940's and television in the 1950's combined to create a decline of traditional music hall entertainment. Television was particularly bad for 'speciality' acts as once they were shown, the artistes acts that may have taken many years to acquire, was used up.

In the later years the *Palace Theatre* was operated by *Variety Theatres Consolidated Ltd* and in response to the situation tried a range of different entertainment in an unsuccessful attempt to reverse the failing economic situation. They produced variety shows that were varied with musical engagements by popular bands such as *Joe Loss and His Orchestra* and *Billy Cotton and His Band*. There were weeks of circus, more plays, annual pantomimes, amateur 'discovery' nights and even nude shows. The plays included "Love on the Dole", "Sweeney Todd" and 'The Murder in the Red Barn".

## Backstage At The Walthamstow Palace Theatre

Bill Martingale, born in 1917, was the last Manager of the *Palace Theatre*. His father was an animal keeper at Belle Vue Zoological Gardens in Manchester. It was a large zoo, amusement park, exhibition hall complex and speedway stadium. It opened in 1836 and at its peak, occupied 165 acres and attracted over two million visitors a year. This would have given the young Bill Martingale a good all round understanding of the basic requirements of running an entertainment business. He spent the war years working with the Entertainment Services Association (ENSA) who entertained service men and women in all the theatres of war. This would have given him invaluable experience of working with theatrical performers.

He started his work at the *Palace* in 1943 as the Stage Manager dealing with accommodation for the acts, the 'props' and scenery. He was promoted to the post of Manager and his responsibilities included: working conditions and wages, relations with the owner, booking shows and players and the price of tickets and publicity.

Eddy Wybrow, writing on Richard Dunne's excellent *Walthamstow Memories* site says:

'...As October approached Terry asked me if I was interested in working evenings with him at the Walthamstow Palace. "Let me see if I might like it first" I said. So off we go and the backstage chaps told me what had to be done. At the back of the circle is the limes (the room where the lights are to illuminate the stage). They did not have bulbs, it was operated by carbon rods. These had to be carefully trimmed to function properly. Come the first night, we had a sheet of paper with the acts on. A quick run through to see what colours were needed or if spots or any other effects were required.

The first week was a bit scary in case you did something wrong. After all, the people on the stage were earning their living. It soon becomes clear though and then the cockiness of youth takes over. We met some of the artists, especially when they wanted something different during their act.

The days were long for us, 7-30 to 5-30. Home for a wash and a quick bite to eat then back on the bike to be ready for the 6-30 show. The second show finished about 10-30 but as we were young, I suppose we had the stamina. Also, after living through six years of war, what was an extra bit of work? It certainly wasn't the money....'

<http://www.walthamstowhistory.com/ym2009.htm>

## Pantomime

Quite early in its existence the *Walthamstow Palace* presented an annual Pantomime. *John Knowles*, the founder of the *Walthamstow Memories* site has been involved in amateur theatre and musical performance all his life. He says that he saw his first show at The *Walthamstow Palace Theatre*, (*'Goldilocks and The Three Bears'*) when he was five years old and fell in love with the theatre. The very last Pantomime at the *Walthamstow Palace Theatre* was the 1953 production of *'Cinderella'*

## The Countess de la Marr



From 3rd November 1952, the ailing *Walthamstow Palace* was taken over by the self styled *'Countess de la Marr'* who negotiated a 21 year lease on the building. She spent a considerable amount of money refurbishing the property and reopened the Gallery for the first time since the 1930's. In an interview with the local newspaper she said that because Walthamstow had become more culturally minded there would be a professional acting company and a week of of top class ballet.

Her first production was *Agatha Christie's 'The Hollow'* presented by the *Savoy Players*. She then staged a three week run of the play *'Charley's Aunt'*. It was a disaster. She continued to stage 'educational' plays such as *'Dark Narcissus'*, *'Night Must Fall'*, *'Pygmalion'* and *'The Corn Is Green'* but they also flopped and she reverted to staging variety including a Pantomime – *'Cinderella'* in 1953. Her last production was a play *'Desire Under The Elms'* on the 20<sup>th</sup> February 1954 and this was also the last ever production staged in the *Walthamstow Palace*.

## After The Ball Was Over



The *Walthamstow Palace Theatre* closed for ever in 1954. It had provided entertainment for over fifty years and was much loved by *Walthamstow* people. After its closure, it stood empty, forlorn, disused and derelict until 1960 when it was finally demolished. All that is left to remind us of the once iconic building, is an architecturally nondescript row of shops with residential accommodation above that was built on the site. This, appropriately, is named the *Palace Parade* and one of the shops is a footwear shop ironically named *'Tower Boots'*.

*Picture left courtesy of Rodney Silk*

Bill Bayliss  
December 2013

