



Cinema and Will Onda in Preston

Preston's First Cinemas and their Groundbreaking Entrepreneur

By David Hindle

Cinema started when Louis Lumière staged the first ever film show for a paying audience in Paris in 1895. Moving pictures or cinematograph shows first came to London in 1896. Methods of projection were crude. In those days 'what the butler saw' performances could be viewed on the so-called phantascope on Lancashire piers. Cinematographic performances were staged in rented halls, shops and by travelling cinematograph operators in fairground tents.

Mitchell and Kenyon were founded in 1897 under the trade name of Norden, operating at first from premises at 40 Northgate, Blackburn, where a treasure chest of films was discovered. The first film was of Blackburn market around 1897. In 1899 George Green commissioned them to film workers leaving factories and by 1902 they were filming the traditional egg-rolling event on Avenham Park. The Preston-born cinema impresario, Will Onda, (real name Hugh Rain) played a key role in cinema provision in the town. Will Onda was born and brought up in the Starkie Street area of Preston. He was educated at Eton and his parents intended that he should enter the ministry, but instead he embarked on a showbusiness career as a circus acrobat. Will Onda is credited with bringing one of the first bioscopes (an early form of movie projector) over from France.



Will Onda portrait
(Courtesy of Flickr)

On returning from France he established so called penny gaffs in shops in the Ashton area which each lasted about one minute. Latterly he lived at 15 Moor Park Avenue and owned one of the first motor cars in Preston.

The former circus acrobat and entertainer opened Preston's first cinema in 1908 in Livesey's former Temperance Hall. This was in keeping with the trend of converting buildings such as theatres, churches and breweries into cinemas. A succession of managers followed Onda's lead, and cinemas expanded significantly in competition with music hall. In the same newspaper advertising Marie Lloyd's live performance in 1911, three cinemas were advertising silent films: 'The Pictureland,' (Embee Hall,) the 'Marathon Electric Theatre' and the 'Imperial Picture Palace,' Church Street.

He became a renowned local film maker and established the largest film rental business in the North West in Cinema House, Corporation Street, Preston.

Will Onda was born during the birth of cinema and pioneered it throughout his life. Fittingly he died during the heyday of the cinema boom of the 1940s.

Continued on page 2

About PHS

Since 1948 the aim of the Society has been to promote the study of local history in Preston and Lancashire. Talks are held in the Central Methodist Church, Lune Street. The annual member subscription is £20. Visitors pay £5 per talk. There are eight talks in each season.

Contact PHS

General enquiries: stewart@prestonhistoricalsociety.org.uk
Membership: patricia@prestonhistoricalsociety.org.uk

 /prestonhistoricalsociety

Music hall accommodated film in its programming

It also had competition from the increasing number of newly built cinemas, which undoubtedly resulted in a reduction of music hall and theatrical activity. The Theatre Royal and the Prince's Theatre competed directly with music hall when Onda started to show the first silent films at these theatres in 1911 and 1913 respectively. Onda also had similar enterprises in Lancaster and Morecambe in 1909 with the Lancaster Hippodrome and Morecambe Alhambra (famous for the location shots of *'The Entertainer'* starring Lawrence Olivier.) Will Onda acquired a former brewery on Brackenbury Place (later Palace Picturedrome) [see image below]. It had curtained boxes, a stage, circle, balcony and a roof resembling a Dutch barn. Local names for cinemas were not uncommon and the Picturedrome was also known as the 'Ranch House' because it specialised in showing westerns.



Will Onda Picturedrome cinema

Will Onda opened the Palace Picturedrome on Brackenbury Place in the early 1920s. Note the Dutch barn roof.

The impresario presented a further threat to variety theatre when, in accordance with social change and to meet the growing demand for dancing, he had the Regent Ballroom built next to the King's Palace in the 1920s. Will perceived that the future was in films, and the Prince's became a full-time cinema around 1915. Silent images of Charlie Chaplin were projected at the Prince's Theatre in 1917 in *'Charlie behind the Screen'*, but on a Saturday afternoon Will presented his *'Mammoth Boxing Entertainment'*.



The Preston cinema revolution continued with silent films until the transition to super cinemas was accelerated in 1927 upon the arrival of the first talkie dialogue: *The Jazz Singer* starring Al Johnson. At the same time Provincial Cinematograph Theatres opened their magnificent art deco New Victoria in Fishergate, equipped with facilities for stage shows with seating capacity for 2,120. During the 1930s the phenomenon of the talkies brought a new batch of art-deco cinemas to Preston. They had contemporary names like the Ritz, Plaza, Empress and Carlton and during the heyday of Preston cinema the town had up to 22 cinemas.



Christmas Book News

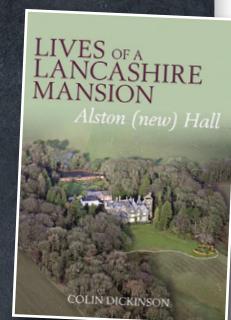
The lover of local history is spoilt for choice this Christmas. Here are just some of the fascinating books available on-line, or at the Preston branch of Waterstones:

Lives of a Lancashire Mansion: Alston (New) Hall

by Colin Dickinson

Six years in the making, this superbly crafted book is a 'must read' for anyone interested in all aspects of Victorian country mansions.

Price: **£25.00**



From Plough to Plau

by Steve Halliwell

This looks into a number of different pubs around Preston and some of the stories behind them, as well as a detailed look at the renovation of Plau on Friargate which won Historic England's 'Best Conversion To Pub Use' in 2020.

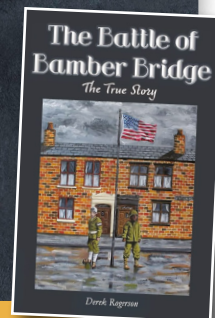
Price: **£14.99**

The Battle of Bamber Bridge, The True Story

by Derek Rogerson

Derek recounts the tale of the battle, adding some possible conversations, as well as the known facts, to bring this battle back to life.

Price: **£8.99**



N.B. Prices may vary depending on the supplier.

PHS

Programme of Talks

Spring 2025



More Summer Walks Memories

Two of our summer walks were too late for inclusion in the September issue, so here, as promised, are reports of those walks to remind us of those late summer days.

Preston Cemetery Walk

with Pete Wilkinson

This walk, which started at the Blackpool Road/ New Hall Lane entrance, took us through the earlier part of the cemetery which was opened in 1855. This covers some eighteen hectares so it was a challenge to find a selection of graves from this huge site that would interest the casual walker. But this is just what Pete Wilkinson managed to do. From the grand monument to Joseph Livesey to the tragic tale of a murder victim from a crime of passion, all life (and death) was here. To the right is just one of the gravestones of famous Prestonians that caught the eye of one of the walkers.



The suffragette Edith Rigby
(below her husband and father-in-law)

A Walk through Roman Walton-le-Dale

with David Hunt

David Hunt always offers good value for money, but he really earned his corn here given that today there was nothing to show of the Roman archaeological remains in Walton-le-Dale (the archaeological dig being reburied and, at the time of the walk, under a travelling circus tent). Despite this, David's vast knowledge of the area enabled him to describe not only the Roman military site and its context in the Roman conquest of North West Britain, but many more points of interest.

The walk started at St Leonard's church where we had a bonus guided tour inside the church. We then walked along the busy Victoria Road, turning left onto Winery Lane where we took a small detour into the Capital Centre car park where there is a very informative display board which explains the archaeology of the Roman site with a suggestion of what it might have looked like when it was occupied. We continued, turning left after crossing the River Darwen, to walk through the charming hamlet of Walton Green, before returning back along Chorley Road to St Leonard's.



David Hunt at the archaeological display in the Capitol Centre car park.

10 February

Alan Crosby

Popish Boys and the King's Whore:
Faith and Religion in Lancashire
1530-1650

10 March

Jennifer Reid

19th Century Working Songs
and Broadside Ballads

14 April

Alex Miller

Your History on your Doorstep:
Exploring Lancashire Archives
and Local History

12 May

Geoff Timmins

Chimney Pots and Chamber Pots:
Working Class Housing in
19th Century Lancashire

All talks are included in the membership fee of **£20**. Visitors pay **£5** per talk. Talks take place on the 2nd Monday of each month and start at **7.15pm**. Doors open at **6.30pm** so that members and visitors can meet friends at the **Olive Grove Coffee Shop, Central Methodist Church, Lune Street, Preston, PR1 2NL**.

Membership enquiries:

patricia@prestonhistoricalsociety.org.uk

The Birth of Lancashire

Part 1 – The Wild West by Stewart Turner

By the middle of the fifth century, the Roman Empire was in trouble from incursions of barbarians from the east. In Britain regular troops were being sent to the Continent to shore up the eastern forces and replaced by 'friendly' *Saxon foederati* and their families. Thus was set in motion the eventual invasion and colonisation of Britain by the Saxons, and their neighbours the Angles, Frisians, and Jutes. The native Britons, deprived of their Roman defenders, attempted to resist, but eventually were overwhelmed, some choosing to flee to the safety of mountainous Wales, but many to submit, attempting to live side-by-side with their conquerors. The location of this latter group can often be recognised by the name Walton/Welton ('Welshmen's village' (*Weala tun*) from the Saxon word for 'foreigner'. Very few Romano-British place names remain in Lancashire. This is somewhat backed up by a study of such place names surviving in the north-west¹ which showed very few place names that could be readily associated with human habitation. For example, in *Tulketh* (wood in a hollow) there was no suggestion of occupation. On the other hand, *Inskip* ('fish trap') does imply human occupation/habitation. Equally, in the area between the rivers Lune and Mersey there is very little archaeological evidence of post Roman-British settlements, and agriculture which has led some historians to believe that these Britons were mainly pastoral (i.e. farming flocks and herds).

What is noticeable from the map in figure 2 is that the North-West of Britain was not conquered by the Anglo Saxons and would not become part of 'England' for several centuries after this period. The main powers in the North were Northumbria, and Mercia in the Midlands. Lancashire must have been viewed by these two powers rather as the 'Wild West' appeared to the American settlers. If the Northumbrians and Mercians were the 'cowboys', then the Britons were the 'Indians' (the Native Americans), but the main obstructions to conquest were the last British Kingdom of Elmet to the East (finally conquered c. 620), and the River Mersey and the peat moss bogs which formed an effective barrier to Mercia's northern advance.

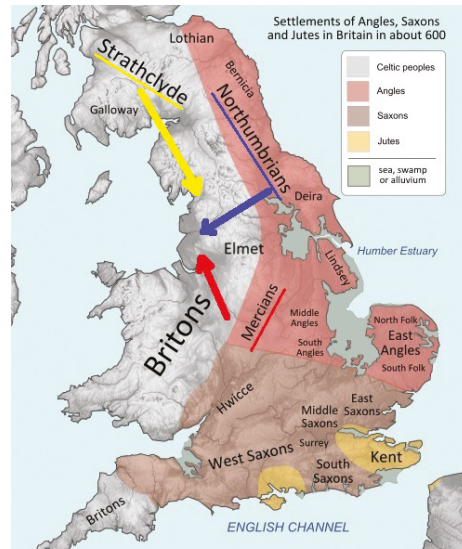


Fig. 2. The North Britons under threat⁴
The British kingdom of Strathclyde claimed Cumbria.

Nevertheless, by the middle of the 7th century, Mercia was moving into the region 'inter Ripam et Mersham' (the land between the Ribble and Mersey), and Northumbria was moving west. In 670 King Egfrith came to power in Northumbria and set about, not only extending his power in the north against the Picts but invading large parts of what is now Lancashire. Wilfrid, Bishop of Ripon (St Wilfrid) described in 675 'the area iuxta Rippel which the British clergy have deserted, fleeing the hostile swords in the hands of our people'². The British clergy that Wilfrid was talking about were the Celtic monks sent out from the Scottish island of Iona to spread the Christian word. In 664 at the Synod of Whitby, the Roman church, championed by Wilfrid, had won the argument against those following the Celtic liturgy, ostensibly about how Easter should be calculated, but in reality, was about who should control the English church. Wilfrid was furious because the Celtic monasteries in the west were ignoring the Synod's ruling. It seems certain that Wilfrid was including Preston in this area next to the Ribble because it was shortly before this in 670 that there was 'a grant of lands along the Ribble to St Wilfrid's abbey at Ripon'³ Wilfrid's biographer forgot to mention, however, whether other lands had been given to Egfrith's warriors as rewards for this special operation. What is apparent, in any records, is the absence of any 'Geronomo' or 'Sitting Bull' to organise resistance. After more than five hundred years of 'Pax Romana'* the descendants of the ancient *Brigantes* (the North West's pre-Roman occupants) and Roman settlers had lost the ability to defend themselves. So began the start of the gradual colonisation of the area we now call Lancashire, but it would take another five centuries or more before the shire we know today became a reality.

In the next Issue:

Part 2 : The Vikings are Coming!

* Strictly speaking this was the period 27 BC to AD 180 but is used here to mean the settled conditions created by Roman occupation.

¹ The Brittonic Language in the Old North: Alan G. James

² The Life of Wilfrid: Stephen of Ripon (the saint's biographer)

³ A History of Preston: David Hunt

⁴ (based on Britain.circa. 600 - Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain – Wikipedia)



Fig. 1. This exquisite Celtic bowl was found in the ship burial of King Raedwald (d. c.625) at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk. Its origin has been traced to North West England, demonstrating that the area was not totally bereft of culture and civilisation, or of trading links with the rest of Britain.

