

***PLACES OF ENTERTAINMENT
IN EDINBURGH***

Part 1

THE SOUTH SIDE

Compiled from

***Edinburgh Theatres, Cinemas and Circuses
1820 - 1963***

by George Baird

*In Memory of my wife, Betty,
25 August 1932 – 21 December 1999*

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FOREWORD

After Frances Watt of Nicolson Square Methodist Church had read my father's book *Edinburgh Theatres, Cinemas and Circuses 1820-1963*, she approached me to give a talk about places of entertainment in the South Side to the Epworth Group of her church. While preparing the material for the talk I was seized with the idea of producing compact books for some of the localities in Edinburgh. Here is the first; I hope it will be of interest to *Sooth Siders*, past and present. My father used the term *Sooth Siders* in his History. His use of the vernacular was in no way derogatory; it was a term of endearment, reminding him of his comrades from the *Sooth Side* who served with him in the 5th Battalion of the Royal Scots.

In 1959 my father, **George Baird, 1893-1967**, conceived the idea of writing the History. His primary aim was to report the emergence of 'houses of entertainment', by quoting the first advertisement relating to the opening of the theatre or cinema; the price of admission; and what was being presented for the entertainment of *Edinburry* folk. The main sources for doing this were: *The Scotsman*, *Edinburgh Evening News*, *Edinburgh Evening Dispatch*, *Edinburgh Courant*, *Leith Burghs Pilot*, *Leith Port Annual*; Window Bills, handbills, held by the Edinburgh Room and the National Library; and the 1915 and 1954 *Kinematograph Year books*. Background information was included where he thought it would be of interest to the reader. His sources for this were J.C.Dibdin's *Annals of the Edinburgh Stage*; James Grant's *Old and New Edinburgh*; Councillor Wilson McLaren's Reminiscences, as given in the *Edinburgh Evening News*; and *Edinburgh in the Nineteenth Century*.

He started work on the History in October 1959 and from the outset received practical support from the City Librarian, Mr.C.M. Minto, and the staff of the Edinburgh Room. He acknowledged the help of Librarians thus, "Facts and Diamonds have this in common – one must dig for them in their respective habitats. In this case facts are to be found in Libraries. That, however, is not the whole story, for, without the skilled Librarian to help, one would be like a traveller trying to cross a desert with no knowledge of map-reading, nor of navigation. My grateful thanks to the many Librarians

who have assisted me over the years in my search for facts of a historical character.”

In 1964 he completed his research into the opening of 70 theatres, 120 cinemas, 40 circuses and 22 skating rinks, ice and roller. It was a tragedy that as he was nearing the completion of the History he fell ill in the Spring of 1964; as a consequence he was unable to compose a foreword to the History. Two copies of the History were produced by typewriter: the top copy is held by the Edinburgh Room, I have the carbon copy.

With a view to making the History available to a wider readership, I decided to re-set the History in *Word 97*, in A4 format. Keying the 180,000 words made me realise the enormous task undertaken by my father in transcribing most of the text from source material. I completed the A4 version of the History in July 2000.

The material in this book is drawn from Chapters: 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 13, 18, 28, 29, 30, 32 and 33 of the History. References to sources of information have been abbreviated by using the following conventions- **S:** *The Scotsman*; **WS:** *The Weekly Scotsman*; **EN:** *Edinburgh Evening News*; **ED:** *Edinburgh Evening Dispatch*; **EC:** *Edinburgh Courant*.

My personal comments are shown in square brackets [].

George F. Baird
September 2001

19 NICOLSON STREET

Fashions in entertainment change over the years, but we can be sure entertainment has been provided wherever there are people to enjoy it. An example of this is the *Drum* development in the Leith Street/Greenside Place area which is due for completion in 2002.

The *Sooth Side* was very much in the Old Town, with its population of about 70,000 at the 1821 Census housed in the towering tenements lying to the east and west of the spine which runs south from the High Street: the South Bridge, Nicolson Street and Clerk Street. Where better to build the first place of entertainment in the area than at 19 Nicolson Street, where ***DUCROW'S CIRCUS*** was erected in 1820? In the following year, **1830**, it was renamed ***ROYAL AMPHITHEATRE***.

JAMES THORPE COOKE'S CIRCUS, 1846 (S 11 November **1846**). In November **1846** **James (Thorpe) Cooke** opened a neatly fitted up and commodious circus at the back of the York Hotel, Nicolson Street. This was remarkably well attended and Mr Cooke was praised for seemingly having ample resources for the entertainment of all who delight in the exhibitions of dexterity or fine training, either in man or beast.

PABLO FANQUE'S AMPHITHEATRE, 1853 (*Dibdin's Annals*) During an operatic season in the *Theatre Royal, Shakespeare Square*, in **1853**, the company along with some artistes from the *Adelphi*, Broughton Street, joined together and flitted to ***Pablo Fanque's Amphitheatre***, Nicolson Street, where they performed the pantomime, *Harlequin Dick Whittington*. Dibdin noted that the *Amphitheatre* was a wooden structure, in ruinous condition. On one occasion snow fell on the audience during the performance.

DUNEDIN HALL, 1854 In the year **1854** the name was changed to ***Dunedin Hall*** which was used for various types of entertainment and exhibitions. In May **1856** (S Friday, 16 May **1856**) a French company of equestrians were stated to be well worth a visit. The Lord Provost, **Sir John Melville**, and the Magistrates and Town Council were seen to give the company their rapt attention.

COOKE'S ROYAL CIRCUS, 1858 In a review of a performance (S Thursday, 11 March 1858) the proprietor was praised for catering zealously for the entertainment of his patrons. Variety and novelty were, as far as possible, made prominent features in the performances, which, from the ability of the company, whether clowns or equestrians, were always either amusing or entertaining. The evening in question was a 'fashionable box-night', the entertainment being under the patronage of the learned Sheriff of Midlothian.

SANGER'S CIRCUS AND HIPPODROME, 1859 An advertisement (S Wednesday, 14 December 1859) noted that a brilliant box night under the immediate patronage and presence of the Right Hon. **James Moncrief**, Lord Advocate for Scotland, and Adam Black, Esq., M.P, was to be held on Friday evening, December 16th 1859. Sanger's had much pleasure in informing the Nobility, Gentry etc., that regardless of expense, they had succeeded in making arrangements for the appearance of

THE SALAMANDER WAR HORSE THE FIRE KING

It will be seen from this and preceding items that local dignitaries were invited along to give a cachet of dignity to the proceedings.

During the period 1820-1862 there was no reference to the building first occupied by **Ducrow's Circus** having to be replaced due to its going on fire, or because the wooden structure reported by Dibdin in 1853 as being in a 'ruinous condition', falling into further disrepair; but there were compelling reasons for building a new theatre on the site.

The Scotsman, reported on Saturday September 13th 1862 that the **Dunedin Hall** had been used as a circus, a theatre, a concert room, a hall for exhibitions of waxwork and dioramic views – as a place of worship, but observed that it was never a very comfortable place to sit in despite the fact that a considerable sum had been spent to secure the comfort of the public. It was well patronised, owing to its being the only place of amusement in the city [strictly speaking in the South Side of the city]. With the approaching closure of the lease of the Dunedin Hall, the opportunity was being taken to build a substantial replacement, the **Southminster**. This was done in the knowledge that a new theatre, the **New Royal Alhambra**, was due to open at 50 Nicolson Street in September 1862. The entrepreneurs must have studied the market and decided that two places of entertainment in close proximity

to each other would be viable in the South Side. Over the next 25 years the hall at 19 Nicolson Street had to be rebuilt due to the ravages of three fires

SOUTHMINSTER THEATRE, 1863 *The Scotsman*, described the new building, which opened on the evening of Saturday, March 7th 1863, in the following terms: a magnificent building erected on the site of the ***Dunedin Hall*** has now been completed and will be opened as a circus by Mr **Charles Hengler** of Liverpool, this evening. The roof is tastefully ornamented and surrounded with the flags of all the nations, and from it are suspended eight large and small chandeliers which, when lighted with gas, will give the interior a most magnificent appearance. The building is 120 feet long by 90 feet broad and the ring is 43 feet in diameter; it will hold about 3,000 people. Dean of Guild, Mr Gibbons, reported that it is perfectly substantial and secure, however much it may be crowded.

HENGLER'S CIRCUS, 1863 (S Monday, 9 March 1863) “opened to the public for the first time on Saturday evening when it was filled in every part – except for a few reserved 1seats.”

Although the building was mostly used for staging circus performances, an advertisement (S Monday, 20 December 1869) announced the presentation of *The Lothians or Prince Edwin and the Fairies of the Thistle*, which was performed nightly.

Three Fires (Dibdin's Annals)

Southminster fire, 1875. “The ***Theatre Royal***, Broughton Street, was burned to the ground on Saturday, February 6th 1875, the third fire on that site. The manager of the ***Theatre Royal*** made arrangements with the ***Southminster Theatre***, Nicolson Street, to give three nights of opera commencing March 4th 1875. On Sunday March 14th 1875, the ***Southminster*** was gutted by fire, while much of the surrounding property, including Balcarras' Old York Hotel, was completely destroyed.

QUEEN'S THEATRE, 1875 In the short space of nine months the ***Southminster*** was rebuilt in a more substantial manner, and on Monday, December 13th 1875, the new theatre, called the ***Queen's Theatre***, opened with a performance of *La Sonnambula*.

Queen's Theatre fire, 1877 "The *Queen's Theatre* was destroyed by fire on Wednesday, April 4th 1877. One of the walls of the *Queen's* crashed and an onlooker was buried in the debris. In about 10 minutes the man was fortunately rescued by a number of citizens. Damage amounted to £8,000."

WELDON'S CIRCUS, 1877 Within seven months, a new building with accommodation for 3,000 was erected to replace the *Queen's Theatre*; it opened as *Weldon's Circus* (S 20 October 1877)

From a programme dated Wednesday, January 1st 1879.

"Weldon's Circus Doors open at 7 o'clock, to commence at half-past"

There were twelve turns on the programme, including: No. 6 The Laughable Equestrian Pantomime *Ride-a-Cock Horse to Banbury Cross* in which twelve artistes took part; No. 7 The Fire Horse *Salamander*; No. 11 Vaulting extraordinary by *Funny Ferns*.

Prices: Reserved, 3s.; Boxes, 2s.; Pit and Promenade, 1s.; Gallery, 6d.

WATSON'S GRAND CIRQUE, 1879 An advertisement (S Wednesday, 30 July 1879) announced that *Watson's Grand Cirque* would appear at *Weldon's* from Thursday July 31st to Saturday, August 30th 1879.

NEWSOME'S CIRCUS, 1879 The first intimation of *Newsome's* entry into Edinburgh as circus proprietors was in *The Scotsman* of Monday, September 8th 1879.

"Newsome's Circus, Nicolson Street Programme, May 4th 1883

Pansterorama of Passing events Across the Atlantic 120,000 miles in 120 minutes

Harry H. Hamilton's Excursions (a few of the 35 scenes included in the Programme)

**1. Leaving Euston Station. 6. Departure of the steamship "Germanic".
8. Broadway, New York 17. Falls of Niagara – American side.
23. City of San Francisco. 29. The Capital of Washington."**

An announcement was made (S Saturday, 7 November 1885) that *Newsome's* would re-open for the Season on Monday, November 9th 1885; that artistes of the highest reputation in Equestrian and Gymnastic

Profession had been secured – it was stated the Clowns ‘combine Mirth without Vulgarity’; that constant changes in the Programme would be made; and that the Building had been thoroughly renovated and the comfort of the Patrons had been given every attention. Mid-day Performances were to be held every Wednesday and Saturday at 2.30 p.m.

The special train containing Stud and Company was due to arrive in Edinburgh at 12 o’clock on Monday morning, November 9th 1885 by the Caledonian Railway, Princes Street Station. The Noble Stud Horses were to be on view daily from 2 p.m. till 5 o’clock.

Admission: Private boxes from £1. 1s.; Reserved Seats 3s.; Boxes (Select), 2s.; Pit and Promenade, 1s.; Gallery, 6d. Children under 10 years: Reserved Seats, 1s. 6d.; Boxes, 1s.; Pit and Promenade, 6d.; Plan of Reserved Seats at Paterson and Sons, Music Sellers to the Queen, 27 George Street. Carriages were to be ordered for 10.10 p.m.

Doors open at 7 p.m., performances to commence at 7.30 p.m. Half-price at 9 o’clock to all parts except Gallery.

Newsome’s fire, 1887

The Scotsman, Wednesday September 14th 1887, reported that “destruction was complete as a result of a fire on 13 September 1887. Nothing remained but the brick walls, in parts broken down.....One could see through a gap from Nicolson Street to the Potterrow. The United Free Presbyterian Church in College Street was also damaged.Several members of the Company lost money etc., they were busy yesterday looking among the ruins to see if anything was spared. One member of the Company discovered the framework of a box, and on sifting the ashes he found four half-sovereigns fused into a single piece of gold.

Mr **E.H.Moss** of the *Theatre of Varieties* (No. 5 Chambers Street) who had rented the circus from the proprietor Mr **Newsome**, and had almost completed negotiations for a three years lease of it, was in Newcastle on Monday night (12.9.1887), and on returning yesterday morning he telegraphed to Mr Newsome at Blackpool asking him to come to Edinburgh. Mr Moss who had been at the expense of erecting a stage in the circus, fitting it up as a place of entertainment and providing the arena with chairs, has sustained a loss amounting to about £400. The circus, it is understood, was insured with the *Phoenix Company*.”

Newsome's re-opened, 1888

H.E. Moss's *Fourth New Year Carnival, Waverley Market* was held between December 24th **1888** and Saturday, January 5th **1889**. In the programme, which cost one penny, it was advertised that ***Newsome's Circus***, Nicolson Street, would commence on Monday, December 31st **1888**, with **Sam Hague's Minstrels**. Thus within 15 months of the destructive fire on Tuesday, September 13th **1887**, ***Newsome's Circus*** had re-opened for business.

That the ***Newsome*** story was drawing to a close is borne out by a letter dated 8 August **1889** from **H.E. Moss to John Henry Cooke** (the original letter is held by the Edinburgh Room). In it Moss confirmed that he was tenant of ***Newsome's Circus*** and came to an arrangement with Cooke whereby:

"That **1** I shall not let ***Newsome's Circus*** to be used as a circus for the ensuing winter season and **2** and that after you have terminated your ensuing winter season at your circus in Edinburgh that you shall not let or allow your circus to be used for the purposes of variety entertainments in any way similar to the entertainments given by me at the ***Gaiety*** and that for the period from the termination of your ensuing winter season at which date this agreement terminates".

MOSS' EMPIRE PALACE OF VARIETIES OPENED 1892.

In a letter dated February 26th **1963**, David Simpson, Secretary of Moss' Empires Ltd, 3 Charlotte Square, Edinburgh, informed the author that "The title deeds of the ***Edinburgh Empire*** property show that Sir Edward acquired the site of ***Newsome's Circus*** on 28th May **1890**." The architect was **Frank Matcham**, who was responsible for the plans of most of the theatres in ***Moss' Empires Group***.

The advertisement (**S Monday, 7 November 1892**) about the opening of the ***Empire*** on Monday, November 7th **1892**, announced that doors would open at 6.45, to commence at 7.15.

The programme, printed in satin, included the following 14 items: God Save the Queen; **Miss Cora Stewart**; **Mr Albert Christian, baritone**; **Miss Givlia Warwick, soprano**; **Mr Ben Nathan, comedian**; 'Performing Cockatoos' ; **Miss Kate Cohen, contralto**; **Professor Marvelle and his canine wonders**; **Harry Atkinson**; **The Brothers Poluski, grotesque**

comedians; Evans & Luxmore, Musical Eccentrics; The Craggs, acrobats; The Argyll and Surtherland Highlanders, under the command of Colonel Charter; and the Carabiniers, under the command of Colonel McGeorge.

Admission prices

During the first week prices at the *Empire* from Monday November 7th to Saturday November 12th 1892 were: Boxes – Private, £1.11s. 6d.; Grand Circle, 3s.; Stalls, 3s.; Upper Circle and Promenade, 2s.; Pit, 1s.; Gallery, 6d. Every-day prices operated from Monday, November 14th 1892: Stalls, 1s.6d.; Boxes, 1s.; Pit and Promenade, 6d.; Gallery, 4d.

First Moving Pictures in Edinburgh shown in Empire, April 13th 1896

In an article which appeared in the *Edinburgh Evening Dispatch*, in August 1946, it was claimed that Edinburgh was the first city in Scotland to show moving pictures on Monday, April 13th 1896, at the *Empire Palace of Varieties*. Described as ‘the greatest novelty of the age and the latest scientific triumph, the rage of London and Paris, showing animated pictures’, the *cinematographe*, as it was then called, was billed as an ‘important engagement for six nights, and Saturday Matinee’. On the same bill as the *cinematographe* were a number of variety turns.

The *cinematographe* was described (S Tuesday, 14 April 1896) as “a kind of electric lantern, by which instantaneous photographs of Edison’s wonderful *Kinetoscope* are thrown onto the screen”. The demonstration was, however, beset by some teething troubles.

The *Dispatch* article went on to state that The **Brothers Lumiere** (France), pioneers in the *cinematographe*, arranged for their instrument to be used for showing eight pictures at the *Empire Palace Theatre* in the week beginning June 1st 1896, ‘for the first time in Scotland’. The *Lumiere cinematographe* was hailed as an outstanding success and retained for another week. This mammoth programme was supported by a star variety company.

In the middle of the Gay Nineties my father [the author was born in 1893 G.F.B.] took me to see the moving pictures at the *Empire*. I can never remember the *Empire* being called anything else but – the *Empire*.

Empire fire May 1911, death of Lafayette and nine members of staff

On Saturday, May 6th 1911 (WS Saturday, 2 May 1942) Lafayette's dog, *Beauty*, died. He had it embalmed and after several companies refused his request to have the dog buried in a cemetery, Piershill cemetery consented on the distinct assurance that Lafayette himself would be buried in the same spot, no matter in whichever part of the world he might die. *Beauty's* grave, a white-tiled vault and memorial stone cost £260.

Lafayette's Death in Theatre Fire

On Monday, May 1st 1911. Lafayette opened his engagement at the *Edinburgh Empire*. On Tuesday, May 9th the awful fire took place, in which ten people, including Lafayette, perished in the flames – all members of the staff. Mr C.B. Fontaine averted a panic by having the safety-curtain lowered. On the night of the disastrous fire the 4th and 5th Battalions of the Royal Scots Territorials were on evening manoeuvres. The police authorities approached the respective commanding officers for the co-operation of the troops for crowd control, which was immediately granted.

***Empire's* Temporary Home at Theatre Royal, Broughton Street (EN Monday, 29 May 1911)**

While the *Empire* was being rebuilt Moss arranged for his contracted artistes to appear at the *Theatre Royal*, as from Monday 29th May 1911, twice nightly, 6.40 and 8.50. Madame Ella Russell topped the Bill.

***Empire* Grand Re-opening on Monday, August 7, 1911 (EN Saturday, 5 August 1911)**

The destruction caused by the fire was repaired in just three months, that is, from May 9th to August 7th. Top of the Bill were: **Le Roy, Talma & Bosco, Bioscope.**

Prices: 10s. 6d.; 2s. 6d.; 1s. 6d.; 1s.; 6d.; and 3d.”

Saturday night visits to the *Empire* by the author, prior to the 1914 War

It was from the ‘gods’ of the *Empire* that I saw the majority of the pre 1914 favourites. On returning from the Hearts’ home games at Tynecastle, it called for a quick tea and a short discussion on how Bobby Walker had played that afternoon; then off post-haste to the *Empire*. The ‘seats’ were hard boards, without backs, what mattered that, it was the show we went to see. It was always the First House I went to; the price for the Gallery was

3d. The entrance to the Gallery was through a pend off the Potterrow, then up a **long** flight of stairs to the GODS – Happy Days pre 1914.

I was serving my apprenticeship as a house painter during the first decade of the century. Saturday was the day of all days. Three pence for the boys' gate at Tynecastle; 3d. for the Empire; and perhaps a visit to the Waverley Market Saturday night concerts, cost 3d., that is if I and my chums were not skint.

The happy days at the *Empire* lasted until August **1914**. Being a Territorial in the 5th Royal Scots – Edinburgh 'Blacks' - I 'fell in' at the first toot of the bugle; that, I am afraid, put paid to the on goings with a vengeance. The care-free days were beyond recall; we jumped in one go from youths to manhood. The world never seemed to be the same again. I returned to civvy street in March **1916**, following ten months in Military Hospitals as a result of being wounded at Gallipoli on 5 May **1915**. I, like many others, tried to pick up the broken threads and my goodness they were not only broken, they were in bits and pieces. I missed my comrades, many of whom are still there.

Theatre closed from November 12th 1927 to September 29th 1928 for reconstruction (EN 2 October 1928) During its closure the theatre was converted into a modern structure. The promenades on the North and South sides of the old auditorium were removed, with the width of the building being increased from 57 feet to 88 feet; the immediate effect of which was to convey *spaciousness and comfort*. The decoration of the auditorium was in delicate grey shades, with blue and silver relief, and with *Rose du Barry* upholstery. A succession of musical plays, all first class, all attractive, was planned. Booking for all parts of the house would now be available.

***EMPIRE THEATRE* EDINBURGH GRAND RE-OPENING MONDAY
OCTOBER 1, 1928 (EN Tuesday, 2 October 1928)**

**DRURY LANE'S GREAT SUCCESS *SHOWBOAT*
With a Company of 110 artistes
Once nightly at 7.30 p.m.,
Matinees Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2.30 p.m.**

Prices, including Tax: Stalls 7s., 6s.6d., 5s.9d., 5s., Pit Stalls, 3s.6d., Circle, 5s.9d., 4s.9d., Balcony, 2s.4d., 1s.3d. All of which are bookable in advance (no booking fee)

New Wing added to South side, 1938

Luxury Waiting Rooms - £10,000 Scheme The aim of the of the new wing, built near Nicolson Square, was to provide much needed room for waiting queues, which formerly stood on the verge of a very busy street.

Eliminating Congestion The public waiting to see the show were now to be admitted direct to the new lounges, thus saving congestion. A new Box-Office, constructed to the left of the vestibule, was equipped with a row of windows so as to reduce the rush to a minimum, if not wipe it out entirely.

Lounges and Car Park In the refurbished lounges, the floors were tessellated and carpeted, doors were of polished walnut wood. In the new lounge bar use was made of black glass topped fittings and glass fronted shelves. Outside the theatre, where once a block of tenements stood, the resultant space would probably be used as a parking space. There would also be a new exit to Nicolson Square.

The former yard of the theatre was in process of being roofed in with a canopy of glass and concrete which would mean that crowds awaiting admittance to the balcony would stand under cover and would be further sheltered by the theatre and surrounding buildings.

Empire Theatre Christmas and New Year Season For 6 weeks commencing Monday December 18th 1961 (EN Saturday, 16 December 1961)

Empire Theatre Last two performances, Today at 5 and 8 p.m. (EN 27 January 1962). Oklahoma Prices: 3s.6d. to 10s.6d.

The Empire Monday November 7th 1892 to Saturday January 27th 1962
The *Empire* existed for almost 70 years as a variety theatre, during which time many millions of patrons enjoyed the clean fare within its walls.

25,000 members enrol for new *Empire Casino* (EN Wednesday, 20 February 1963)

On March 5th 1963 the new *Empire Casino Club* in Edinburgh will open, with a membership of 25,000 – more than ten times the capacity of the hall. The general manager, Mr **T. Proctor**, told the *News* today that the club was more than just a place for gambling. “It is a social centre”, he said, “with a little flutter thrown in. We are providing all possible amenities for our members, including seven new buffets, and we will be putting on Charity Shows. During the *Festival*, of course, we will be hosts to the Budapest Ballet, and any theatrical productions during the Festivals which can use the theatre, for we have not interfered with the stage in any way, and still seat 2,016 people.”

Sale of Empire to Mecca £160,000 For Bingo (SDM Wednesday 6 March 1963)

MR H.E.MOSS's ACTIVITIES IN EDINBURGH (S Tuesday, 25 November 1912 - Obituary)

Born near Manchester, 1852; Myriorama operator at the age of 16; Manager of a theatre in Greenock

Sir Edward Moss, J.P., D.C., Chairman of **The Moss Empires (Ltd.)** was born near Manchester in **1852**, the son of James Moss a theatrical manager. At the age of 16 he started his career as a myriorama entertainer and then became a diorama conductor, for which in the later decades of the last century there was plenty of country patronage. He moved to Greenock, to become manager of a theatre which his father had taken over, where he remained for 5 or 6 years, acquiring the valuable experience which enabled him to develop his instinct for gauging public taste.

Moved to Edinburgh in 1875. Bought No. 5 Chambers Street and opened Moss' Theatre of Varieties (Gaiety), 1877; Set standards for clean fare

The real foundation of his fortune was, however, laid in Edinburgh to where he moved in **1875**. In December **1877** he purchased No 5 Chambers Street, comprising the *Gaiety Theatre*, the University Hotel above the theatre, and several shops on either side of the *Gaiety*, all for the sum of £15,000. The theatre's fortunes were by no means flourishing.

Moss' First Theatre (S Monday, 24 December 1877)

“MOSS' VARIETIES (LATE GAIETY) CHAMBERS STREET
This evening and during the week

The Programme

Bradley's Burlesque waxwork; Pashur Nimrod; Madam Donti; Messrs Graham and McBride; Mr and Mrs Warriner; Misses Sandforth and Smith; Mr J. Pullard; and a host of other artistes. Admission: 2/-; 1/-; and 6d. Half Price at 9 o'clock”

Moss had this to say in his second week (S Monday, 31 December **1877** Advertisement): “Gigantic success of opening, patronised by the respectable and intelligent.”

Mr Moss forthwith set about making alterations which he thought would be in the best interests of respectable patrons:

Change of Name His first step was to change the name from the *Gaiety Theatre of Varieties* to *Moss' Theatre of Varieties*. The name did not suit many of the patrons who continued to call it by its old name.

His second, and most important step, was to **clear out the undesirable element** from his house. The struggle was long and bitter; indeed, failure stared him in the face. He was resolved that the Music Hall, if it was to prosper, must be clean and acceptable for respectable people who could bring their children without taking a red face. The stand Moss took for clean fare in his first Music Hall, was probably the corner stone upon which he ultimately amassed an enormous fortune. Furthermore, he earned the gratitude of the community on account of the great contribution to the sum total of good and popular entertainment.

Moss was never at rest, he was always scheming to open another place of entertainment, ever reaching for the Stars.

WAVERLEY MARKET CARNIVAL, 1885 His annual Christmas and New Year Carnival was a remarkably successful enterprise. He conceived the idea of a covered-in show following a visit to Sunderland; *Ye Olde English Fayre* opened in the Waverley Market on Monday, December 28th **1885**. Moss continued to prosper. About this time he changed his home address from St Patrick Square to No. 8 Minto Street.

PRINCESS THEATRE, LEITH, 1889 In **1889** William Edgar leased the site of old United Presbyterian Church premises in the Kirkgate, Leith, to Moss who built the *Princess Theatre* on the site; it had accommodation for 1,000 in the Pit and Gallery. This opened on Monday, December 30th **1889**. On Saturdays artistes at the *Theatre of Varieties* did an extra turn in the *Princess*, to which they were taken by chartered horse-cab.

The last of Moss' Theatre of Varieties, Chambers Street (S Tuesday, 1 November 1892)

After a run of popularity as a music-hall extending over close on twenty years, fifteen of which under Mr Moss' management, it was announced the *Moss Theatre of Varieties* would close its doors on Saturday 5 November

1892, and would be superseded by the palatial new *Empire Palace of Varieties* in Nicolson Street.

Opening of the *EMPIRE PALACE OF VARIETIES*, Monday, November 7th 1892

At last, the proudest day in Moss' life dawned on Monday, November 7th 1892, when the first of his 33 super theatres opened. The residents of the *Sooth Side* had something to be cocky about – and no wonder.

TABERNACLE, GREENSIDE PLACE, 1894 (McLaren's Reminiscences)

In 1894, the huge building in Greenside Place, known as the *Tabernacle*, was offered for sale. Mr Moss was quick to see the possibilities of the site as a central one between Edinburgh and Leith; he purchased the building with the object of erecting a handsome theatre on the site; the scheme, however, did not materialise. It was destined to remain a blot on the landscape until the *Playhouse Cinema* opened in 1929. [In like fashion the Leith Street/Greenside Place site lay undeveloped for over 30 years until work started on the *Drum* development in 2001.]

He was knighted in 1905. The fatal fire at the Edinburgh *Empire* in 1911 affected Sir Edward Moss considerably; he died at his home, Middleton Hall, Gorebridge, on 25 November 1912 and was buried in Portobello Cemetery.

He previously stayed at St Patrick Square and Minto Street, Edinburgh – and so could claim to be an adopted *Sooth Sider*.

50 NICOLSON STREET

NEW ROYAL ALHAMBRA, 1862 (S Saturday, 13 September 1862) The new hall was fitted with tiers of boxes and gallery, stage boxes, dressing rooms, orchestra etc. all on the same scale, and after the same model as the *Royal Queen's Theatre*, Broughton Street. The roof was broken into panels and decorated with stars on a blue ground. The proscenium and fronts of the galleries were ornamented in relief in blue and gold. A large crystal chandelier was suspended from the ceiling, and smaller ones set round the boxes, so as to give an abundant supply of light to all parts of the house.

It had seating for 1,500. Refreshment rooms were fitted up for gallery and boxes; the theatre had all the requisites of a first class theatre. It was the intention to carry on the same type of entertainment as had been given during the late winter season at the *Dunedin Hall*.

Grand Opening New Royal Alhambra, Nicolson Street, On Monday, September 29th 1862 (S Monday, 22 September 1862)

“Proprietor: Mr W. Paterson, 10 Hill Square, will open with a GRAND DIVERSIFIED ENTERTAINMENT supported by some of the First Artistes of the Day

The Orchestra, under the able leadership of Mr Edwin McCann.

The Extensive Gas-Fittings and Splendid Crystal Chandeliers, by Messrs
Robertson and Cairns, Nicolson Street

The Boxes will be Elegant and Commodious. The Pit Stalls will be furnished with backs, and comfortably cushioned. The Gallery will also be very conveniently seated, affording ample space for each visitor, and allowing a perfect view of the Stage. The Stair to the Gallery is of easy ascent and entirely built of stone.

Prices of Admission: Front Boxes, one shilling; Pit, sixpence; Gallery, threepence. Private Boxes may be had by applying to the Box Book-keeper.

Doors open at Seven o'clock – Performance to commence at Half Past Seven punctually.

N.B. A limited number of Season Tickets may now be had on very moderate terms.”

PRINCESS'S THEATRE, 1863 (S Thursday, 2 July 1863) The *Princess's Theatre (Late New Alhambra)*, opened on Saturday July 4th, 1863, with the great French Historical Drama, *Cartouche*, produced for the first time in Edinburgh .

Prices of Admission: Centre Boxes, 2/-; Side Boxes, 1/6d;
Pit, 1/-; Gallery, 6d.

Second Price at nine o'clock to all parts of the House
Doors opened at 7 o'clock. Commenced at Half-past 7.
Saturday commenced half-an-hour earlier.

ROYAL PRINCESS'S THEATRE 1868 to 1886 (Dibdin's *Annals*) On Monday, September 14th 1868, the *Royal Princess's* opened its doors under the new management of **A.D. McNeill**, with a production of *Ruth*. The **Carl Rosa** produced *Mignon* for the first time in Edinburgh during September 1879.

On Monday, August 25th 1884, the house was reopened after extensive alterations and decorations, but on Friday, November 7th 1884, Mr McNeill died, and the management of the theatre passed into the hands of his son **W.A. McNeill**, who continued the concern against the most powerful opposition. The house finally closed its doors on May 22nd 1886 (S Saturday, 22 May 1886) with a performance of *The Story of Effie and Jeannie Deans*

Peter Higgin's Autograph Book recalls many idols of the Music Hall (McLaren EN Saturday, 2 January 1937)

Peter Higgins, born in Edinburgh in 1860, acquired the tavern situated between the Gallery door entrance and the stage door entrance to the old *Princess's Theatre* in Hill Place. It quickly became known as the *Football Arms*, and was the resort of the most noted actors and actresses who trod the boards of that famous little South Side Theatre. It may be added that Peter Higgins compiled a large number of autographs of many famous artists, the end product became known as *Peter Higgin's Autograph Book*”

Theatre used by Salvation Army ('J.N.U.' in ED Tuesday-Friday, 16-19 January 1923) The article brought out that the theatre was rebuilt internally as a stronghold of the **Salvation Army**. J.N.U. wryly commented that the walls that had so often re-echoed laughter and applause now gave ear to sounds that were less cheerful and less artistic.

I was unsuccessful in establishing from old Street Directories when the Salvation Army occupied the old ***Princess's***.

LA SCALA, 50 NICOLSON STREET (EN Tuesday, 24 December 1912) opened on Tuesday 31 December 1912 as ***LA SCALA ELECTRA THEATRE, YE OLDE PRINCESS THEATRE***, after being entirely reconstructed, redecorated, ventilated and heated on the most Approved Plans.

It was under the direction of **Ralph Pringle**; performance was continuous from 2.30 till 10.45; with an entire change of Programme on Mondays & Thursdays. Admission prices were: Grand Circle, 9d.; Circle, 6d; Fauteuils, 6d; Stalls, 4d.

An advertisement (EN Wednesday, 18 February 1914), announced that extensive stage alterations had been completed on ***La Scala Ye Olde Princess Theatre***; that Variety would now be a feature of the High Class Entertainment on offer; that there would be Picture Matinees on Saturday afternoons from 2.0 ; and that prices would be as usual.

1915 Kinematograph Year Book, page 468, stated that the theatre had 800 seats, compared with ***New Alhambra's*** 1,500.

5 CHAMBERS STREET

Chambers Street formed in 1870 to link George IV Bridge and the South Bridge

The following is an extract from page 146 of *Edinburgh in the Nineteenth Century* “**1870** Chambers Street – In the course of the summer, North College Street, Brown Square and Adam Square were cleared away to make a new thoroughfare between the South Bridge and George IV Bridge, to be called Chambers Street.” The University was already there on the south side of the Street and was linked to the Royal Scottish Museum by a bridge. On the north side of the Street work began on several buildings in the 1870’s, among which, at Number 5, was *The Gaiety Theatre*, opened in **1875**.

THE GAIETY, 5 Chambers Street (EC Friday, 2 July 1875) opened on Monday, July 5th **1875**; the Proprietors were The Hall Company (Limited), under the management of **Mr G.J. Cruvelli**. The Company included **Lady Don, Soprano; Alexander Bogel, African Tenor; Mr D’Almaine and Miss Townley; Mr Henry Lee and Miss Emma Roberts; J. Rake, Characteristic Comique, Vocalist and Grotesque Dancer; Messrs. Bell and the Eccentric Juba, Negro Comedians; and Marion Constance, Serio-Comic Vocalist and Skipping-Rope Dancer.**

Prices of Admission: Front Balcony, 3s.; Side Balcony, 2s.; Upper Tier and Promenade, 2s.; Orchestra Stalls, 2s.; Stalls, 1s.; and Back Seats, 6d. Half Price at Nine O’Clock: Front Balcony, 1s.6d.; Side Balcony, Upper Tier and Orchestra Stalls, 1s.; and Stalls, 6d.”

Criticism (EC Tuesday, 6 July 1875) “Opening of the *Gaiety*. This finely finished hall in Chambers Street was opened last night by a company of musical and other performers, who went through a varied entertainment in the presence of a large audience. With regard to the company, it cannot be said that the selection is in every case successful, but those who can be spoken of with favour are really talented artistes.

Mr D’Almaine and Miss Townley gave an operatic recital from *Maritana*, which called forth loud and deserved applause. **Mr Henry Lee and Miss Emma Roberts** were equally successful in a ‘domestic scene’ which provoked the almost continuous laughter of the audience. **Mr Alexander Bogel**, the African, sang well. Messrs **Bell and Juba** went through a clever

and amusing ‘nigger’ performance. Miss **Marion Constance** appeared as a serio-vocalist, but her artistic and skilfully executed dances were more enjoyable than her songs. The other comic performers lack much of the liveliness of those who take a high position in that line of entertainment.

Lady Don, who received a loud round of applause, ... Her Ladyship sang two selections, but unfortunately her voice appears not to have the compass of former days, and was not heard distinctly in the back portion of the hall, which was filled principally with the lads such as usually go by the denomination of “The Gods” in the theatre. She sang an encore and was proceeding to acknowledge the compliment with another song, when she was interrupted by some thoughtless and unmannerly youths.” (Then as now, it is a crime to be old – hard luck on Lady Don and her colleagues.)

MOSS’ THEATRE OF VARIETIES (S Monday, 24 December 1877), opened December 24th 1877. The Company included **Bradley’s burlesque waxwork; Pashur Nimrod; Madam Donti; Graham and Mc Bryde; Mr and Mrs Warriner; Misses Standforth and Smith; Mr J Pullard.**

Moss commented (S Wednesday, 26 December 1877) that the Press and Public had acclaimed the show as an ‘Unparalleled Success’. In an advertisement (S Monday, 31 December 1877) the prices of admission were given as: 2s.; 1s.; and 6d. - half-price at nine o’clock. In this advertisement Moss claimed that the “Gigantic Success of the Opening” was due to its being patronised by the **respectable and intelligent.**

Moss’ Theatre of Varieties, last week (S Saturday, 5 November 1892) The theatre closed on Saturday 5 November 1892. In the preceding weeks **Dan Leno** and **Marie Loftus** were the star attractions

Criticism The Theatre of Varieties (S Tuesday, 1 November 1892) “After a run of popularity as a music hall extending over close upon twenty years, fifteen of which have been under Mr Moss’ management, the **Moss’ Theatre of Varieties** last night entered upon its last week as a place of entertainment of this class, as in the course of the next week it will be superseded by the palatial new **Empire Palace of Varieties in Nicolson Street**, which has now all but reached completion. As was natural, the patrons of the place turned out in large numbers to bring to a fitting termination the career of a house which has proved so exceedingly popular with the public, and in its day has

held such an important position as a place of public entertainment in Edinburgh”.

Some users of the theatre

Sunday Night Meetings, 1875-76 (Walter McPhail, editor EN Saturday, 6 September 1941)

“Sunday Night Meetings were first held in the *Old Gaiety* by Professor **Henry Drummond** in the winter of **1875-76**, the offspring of the **Moody and Sankey** Campaign of **1873-74**. Drummond was filled with zeal for every evangelical work. He was even seen at the Register House distributing tracts [perhaps this should read ‘tracts’ G.F.B.]. There was nothing, Moody said, that Drummond would not undertake to do to spread evangelical work among his friends in the University.”

Edinburgh Madrigal Choir (EN Thursday, 25 December 1902)

Grand Sacred Concert on Sunday, December 28th, Prices: 3d.; 6d.; 1s.; and 2s.

That Sunday Concerts continued throughout the years can be seen from the following advertisement (N, Saturday, March 16th 1912)

The Labour Orchestra Conductor, Mr G.W. Crawford (EN 16 March 1912)

Sunday Night (Tomorrow) at 6.30 Chairman: Mr Andrew Young, M.A.
Admission: 3d.; 6d.; and 9d.

Note: Mr **Gerald Crawford** was for many years a member of the Edinburgh Town Council. He did much to foster ‘good’ music among the younger citizens. He served with distinction in the First World War. By profession he was a Civil Engineer. He was an able administrator and was respected by all members of the Town Council

OPERETTA HOUSE, CHAMBERS STREET, EDINBURGH

Operetta House opened Monday December 26th 1892 (S Tuesday, 20 December 1892) with a short season of **Montague Roby’s Famous Midget Minstrels**. Prices: Grand Circle, 3s.; Side Circle, 2s.; Balcony and Pit Stalls, 1s.; Pit, 6d.

In the 1890's Electricity, the greatest single force in the land, was beginning to make itself felt. An entry in the First Electricity Test Book for Edinburgh reads:

“1898. 30 Amp Lamp Installed in Operetta House, 5 Chambers Street. Tested on February 21st 1898.”

Note: Electricity was switched on as a Public Service in Edinburgh on Thursday, April 11th 1895, by Mrs MacDonald, wife of the Lord Provost, from the Princes Street Station Hotel. Messrs **Baildon**, chemists, at Nos 73 and 144a Princes Street, were the first business premises in Edinburgh to have electricity led in; this was tested on May 7th 1895.

Pictures come to the Operetta House (EN Monday, 31 December 1900).
For a Short Season Only:

Edison's Animated Picture
CHINA AND BOER WARS BAND OF THE ROYAL SCOTS,
Q.R.V.B.
Prices: 2s.; 1s.; and 6d.”

This advertisement pinpoints when pictures were first shown in the *Op*.

Other houses and halls which advertised in the *News* that they were showing Animated Pictures at this time were:

Monday December 31st 1900: *Synod Hall, War Pictures*

Monday December 15th 1902: *Pavilion Theatre, Hillcoat Pictures*

Thursday January 1st 1900: *Forrest Road Hall, Animated Pictures*

Saturday, September 1901: *Central Hall, Tollcross, Cinematograph*

In *The Scotsman* of December 20th 1897 the *Queen's Hall, Queen Street*, advertised *The Analyticon*.

I saw *Moving Pictures* in the *Operetta House* prior to the dawn of the 20th Century. The house was affectionately known as the *OP* throughout the city.

Debunking some misstatements about the Operetta House.

The failure to record exactly what was happening in the early days of moving pictures resulted in a variety of misstatements being so frequently repeated, that they have now almost come to be regarded as facts.

More balderdash has been written about the *Operetta House*, than about any other Edinburgh theatre or cinema. In particular, when it first showed moving pictures and that entry could be gained by presenting a jam jar. A variety of dates ranging from **1904** to **1907** have been quoted in the local newspapers about when moving pictures were first shown in the *OP*; the quotation from the *News* confirms that moving pictures were first shown in **1900**.

In the Press Notice issued on the opening of **Adam House** in **1955**, referred to below, it was claimed that ‘it was usual to gain admittance to the old Operetta House, which formerly stood on this site, by the handing over of a Jelly Jar.’ I am happy to nail that canard. Such a method of admission never took place during its 47 years of existence. My father took me to the *OP* in the late 1890’s and I went there with some of my chums in the opening years of the 20th Century. Admission was always on a cash basis. Mrs **Haig**, at present (**1963**) manageress of the *Embassy Cinema*, was the cashier in the Operetta House before the Second World War. She refuted the suggestion that admission could be had to the *OP* by presenting a jelly jar.

Operetta House closed down on Saturday December 23rd **1939**. (**ED** Wednesday, 25 February **1953**). Like a number of Edinburgh cinemas before and after it, the Operetta House became a furniture store.

The *OP* Becomes Edinburgh Headquarters For National Health Insurance

After extensive alterations, the old *Operetta House* became the Headquarters for the National Health Insurance for the Edinburgh Area on July 1st **1948**. On this date the **Welfare State Services** became operative. **Nye Bevan**, Minister of Health, who piloted the scheme through Parliament, formally opened the new premises.

University of Edinburgh Adam House, Edinburgh University Press Notice: “*Adam House*, the new Examination Halls at 4-6 Chambers Street, of the University of Edinburgh, is to be informally opened on Wednesday evening, 18th May **1955**, by the Principal, Sir Edward Appleton.” The name ‘Adam House’ is a graceful tribute to the memory of Robert Adam whose home was in Adam Square, demolished to make way for Chambers Street. In turn, the old Operetta House building was demolished in the summer of **1950** to make way for *Adam House*.

ST. MARY'S STREET HALL

Production of 'Shaughraun', 1878 (EC Tuesday, 1 January 1878). This was given by the by the Dramatic Association of the Catholic Young Men's Society, on 1-3 January 1878. Prices of Admission: 2s.; 1s.; and 6d.

There follows some of Councillor **Wilson McLaren's** reminiscences about the Hall.

How Willie Sangster, pianist, caused a free for all by playing 'Boyne Water' "The area had a predominantly Irish population and, very naturally, the audiences who frequented the Hall were adherents of the Catholic faith. The orchestra consisted of a piano, played by a blind man named **Willie Sangster**; although blind he was a bit of a wag. On this occasion he had just finished playing the *Overture* and before the stage performance began, Willie, out of sheer devilment, played *Boyne Water*. This was too much for the Irish audience, and the balloon went up. A free fight followed and at any time that could mean real trouble."

Mr McLaren, who was present at the time of the incident, tipped off the money-taker to make a run for it, which he did, with his pockets filled with coppers. That finished Mr McLaren's tenancy with the St Mary's Street Hall.

"Harry Lauder got his first 'professional engagement' in *St Mary's Street Hall*, at one of the Saturday Night Concerts. Lauder was booked as an unknown singer; his fee was 7s.6d. Out of this sum the comedian had to pay his own return fare to Glasgow, which cost 2s.6d." Contrast the above 7s.6d. when for an hour on the radio in the 1930's, he received the then unheard of fee of £1,500.

Through the decades the Hall has been used to house many functions, such as amateur drama, dancing, concerts and boxing.

THE STAR PICTURE HOUSE, 'The Starry' , 16 St MARY'S STREET

I never saw an advertisement in the Local Press for the *Star*, but ample evidence exists to show that it was, indeed, a picture house. The Street Directories from 1914-15 to 1924-25 inclusive, bear mute testimony to the fact, and, if further proof were needed, I quote an extract from the **1915 Kinematograph Year Book** : “Proprietor: “Star Picture House Co. Seats: 700.”

In the neighbourhood it was known as *The Starry*. Its close-down was greatly missed by many of the older residents to whom I spoke at various times. One old lady remarked, “It was cheaper to spend a night in the *Starry* than in the pub.”

BITS AND PIECES

Wonderful Ox at The Mound (EC Saturday, 23 September 1820)

That noble, beautiful and immensely sized Durham Ox, called *Caps All*. Six Years Old – 6 feet high; 11 feet 6 inches round the body; 37 inches across the back; 10 feet from tail to horns. Weight – 310 stones. Sold by Auction for one thousand guineas. Bred by Mr Smith, Grindon, near Berwick-upon-Tweed.

Admission – Ladies and Gentlemen, 1s.; Working People, 6d.; Children, 3d.”

It was a noble, beautiful and immense *beastie*. Ladies and Gentlemen paid their bobs to see it but **working people** paid their tanners. Ye Gods! Intolerance in action ‘aw to see a big bull.’

SWALLOW’S HIPPODROME & PEOPLE’S CIRCUS (EC Saturday, 13 November 1875) “At Jeffrey Street, off High Street, Edinburgh Today (Saturday) November 13. Afternoon performances every Saturday at 2.30 p.m.” Admission prices were not given.

PLIMPTON’S PATENT ROLLER SKATING, DRILL HALL, FORREST ROAD (EC Wednesday, 25 May 1875)

The Hall will be open to the Public on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays until further notice, from 10 till 1, and from 2.30 until 6 p.m. Admission, 1s.; Hire of Skates, 6d.”

Edinburgh in the Nineteenth Century, page 149 “The Drill Hall was opened by Lord Provost **James Cowan** on December 21st 1872. It was then known as the ***Forrest Road Volunteer Hall***.”

Note: In 1875 building trade workers received 7d. per hour for 51 hours per week. That is £1.9s.9d. per week. Thus, these workers and their families neither had the income nor the time - 2.30 until 6.30 – to engage in this **sport, past-time, gemmie** or what have you.

THE EDINBURGH ROLLER SKATING RINK, DRILL HALL, FORREST ROAD, formerly Plimpton’s Patent Roller Skating (S Saturday, 4 November 1876) “The Hall will be closed from Monday, November 6th

until further notice, in order that a new and specially prepared asphalt floor may be constructed.” “New floor has been constructed and the hall decorated. Every evening until further notice.”(S 6 December 1876)

The Edinburgh Roller Skating Rink, Drill Hall, Forrest Road (S Saturday, 1 January 1881)

“Open this day 11-1, 2.30-5.30 & 7-10 Augmented band, and by kind permission of Col. Davidson & Officers, the pipes of the Q.E.R.V.B., under the direction of pipe-major Rutherford”

‘Q.E.R.V.B.’ – Queen’s Edinburgh Rifles Volunteer Brigade, which in 1908 became known as Territorials.

WAXWORK & MUSEUM, 11 SOUTH BRIDGE, Edinburgh, 1898 (S Saturday, 24 December 1898)

“Now added – The Sirdar, Lord Kitchener, Captain Dreyfus etc. Singing and Talking Machine.”

As an after-school hours’ message boy, I passed this Waxwork each evening and twice on a Saturday for three years during which period I learned a lot about the *South Side* and the Bridges. My journey was between **Francis Petrie**, Tobacconist, 98 Leith Street, to the branch shop at 104 Nicolson Street, next to Gibb’s Entry. I was about the highest paid message boy in the first decade of the 20th Century, at 2s. 6d. per week, at an average of 1 ¼ hours each night and 2 ½ hours on Saturdays.

LIVINGSTONE HALL 38 SOUTH CLERK STREET

Livingstone Hall (Late Literary Institute) South Clerk Street (EN Friday 20 September 1901):

**“POPULAR SATURDAY CONCERTS
FIRST NIGHT SEPTEMBER 21st”**

ARTISTES Miss Grace Nicol, soprano; Miss Isa Walker, Contralto; Mr Edwin J. Wilkins (London), tenor; Mr A. Grant McDonald, Baritone; Miss Clara Clair, Elocutionist; Mr Alex. Paterson, Descriptive Vocalist; Mr E.D.Ferguson, Clarinet Solo; Mr A. Ponsonby Alexander, Accompanist

Tickets – Threepence Reserved Seats, 6d.; Season Tickets, 5s.

Business Manager: Mr A. Ponsonby Alexander, 14 Dalkeith Road.

Seating Accommodation for 1,040.”

Livingstone Hall, Clerk Street (EN Thursday, 25 January 1912):

**“Under Auspices of Livingstone Hall Mission
Saturday Evening, January 27th 1912, at 8 p.m.**

AMERICAN JUBILEE SINGERS DEPICTING NEGRO LIFE”

***ODDFELLOWS’ HALL* opened on 21st November 1873**

***Oddfellows’ Hall, Forrest Road* (EN Thursday, 1 January 1903)** The advertisement was for Animated Pictures. Here, again, one can read into the advertisement the intention of the promoters; simply an endeavour to keep the unfortunates off the streets and out of the pubs. The Oddfellows’ Hall was one of the busiest in the South Side for many years. Concerts, Trade Union meetings and such like kept it very busy. It had a large hall with gallery; a fair-sized hall on the first floor and one or two big rooms at the top.

STEWART’S WAXWORK, 164/166 HIGH STREET, Edinburgh, 1907
(EN Thursday, 12 September 1907)

“The Fasting Lady, Miss Agnes McDonald 10th Day Open all night and Sunday

Commissionaire on Door.”

Stewart’s Waxwork was situated on the site (164-166 High Street) now occupied by the Cross Post Office. It also occupied the floor above which are now the offices of the Central Branch of the Amalgamated Society of Painters and Decorators.

WAXWORK AND BIOSCOPE, 10 NICOLSON STREET, 1908 (EN Monday, 9 November 1908)

“The Zoo, Waxwork and Bioscope 10 Nicolson Street (opposite the Empire)

Birds, Beasts, etc., in 14 cages Tattoo artist in attendance Admission: 2d.”

CARUSO, ENRICO 1909 (S Saturday, 10 July 1909, preliminary announcement)

“*McEwan Hall CARUSO* On Tuesday Afternoon, September 3rd 1909

Tickets: Reserved – 31s.6d.; 25s.; 21s.; 15s.; and 12s.6d. Unreserved – 10s.6d and 7s.6d.”

At 31s.6d. it was Fine Fayre for Culture Vultures.

Then, as now, he was known by his surname; simply Caruso. It is the hallmark in any walk of life to be referred thus, and stamps the person as being at the top of his calling. I had the pleasure of hearing Caruso in the New York Metropolitan Opera House in December 1916. The McEwan Hall, designed by Dr Rowand Anderson, was opened in 1897.

ROYAL PARK SKATING RINK, ST LEONARD’S BANK (EN Wednesday, 12 January 1910) “ROYAL PARK SKATING RINK, ST. LEONARD’S BANK, ADMISSION 6d. SKATES 6d.”

PENNY GAFFS A perusal of a 1900 Edinburgh City map will show that, in extent, it was not a very big town. Consequently, most of the entertainments were grouped in the then ‘city centre’, namely side-streets off the High Street and, of course, they were found in the Port of Leith. A popular form of entertainment was the *Penny Gaff* [a cheap or low-class place of entertainment].

Nobody had more to write about the *Penny Gaff’s* than Councillor **Wilson McLaren** who captured the interest and imagination of countless citizens for many years. Of the many *Gaffs* that he wrote about in 1937, I will quote two:

“At the foot of Blackfriars Wynd, *penny gaffs* were nightly frequented by people in the surrounding districts. Three shows nightly and what a bill of fare produced by the old mummers – *The Ticket of Leave Man, Sweeny Todd, The Colleen Bawn, Crammon Brig, and Hamlet* with **Ned Holt** playing the principal part.”

And

“Almost a stone’s throw away from Blackfriars Wynd was another show ground much frequented by dwellers in the centre of the city. Leith Wynd (now Jeffrey Street) was the spot. Behind Netherbow Port stood **Harry West’s *Alhambra***, a wooden erection used as a music hall where Variety turns, clog and sand-dancing were much in vogue.”

In **1963** I met **James ‘Willie’ Salvona**, acrobat, showman and ‘play actor’. He told me about the ‘plays’ his family had enacted at the Iona Street Showground *Penny Gaff*, such as *Sweeny Todd the Barber*; *Face at the Window*; *The Body Snatchers*; *Sign of the Cross*; *The Girl Who Took the Wrong Turning* and *Jeannie Deans*. He assured me his family presented *Jeannie Deans* in the actual Court Room where **Jeannie Deans** was tried in the Tolbooth, Canongate.

LITTLE THEATRE, 60 PLEASANCE [Alastair Murray, a well kent theatre buff, reminded me that the *Little Theatre*, The Pleasance Trust, 60 Pleasance, came into existence in the 1930’s. The hall was frequently used by amateur Dramatic Clubs; it closed in **1962** when the property was bought by Edinburgh University. In **1962** Edinburgh Town Council bought the former Morningside High Church and in **1963** provided funds for its adaptation as a 440 seat theatre and art centre – it became the ***Church Hill Theatre***, as mentioned in Chapter 23 of my father’s history. G.F.B.]

CYGNET THEATRE, 30 ST LEONARD’S STREET [Mr Murray told me that the *Cygnets Theatre* occupied the disused St Paul’s Church, 30 St Leonard’s Street, which Edinburgh Town Council made available as a theatre for children’s activities for a short time during the **1950’s**. G.F.B.]

BILLIARD HALLS [As a young man in the late 1940’s I occasionally ventured forth from Tollcross to visit the ***Empire Billiard Hall, 16 Drummond Street***, a large gloomy hall, with about 20 tables; the ***Imperial Billiard Hall, 54 Lothian Street***, under the capable management of Mr Snowdon; and ***Tom Aitken’s, 20 Hill Place***, which was the haunt of good class amateurs, as of course was ***The Imperial***. Championship matches were held in the ***Working Men’s Club, Infirmary Street***. G.F.B.]

THE SOOTH SIDE AND ITS MANY PICTURE HOUSES

The Romans [Juvenal] coined the phrase “Give them beer and circuses”. I have often wondered if, during the second decade of the 20th Century, the phrase was changed to “Give them beer and Picture Houses.” That there is plenty of evidence for thinking along these lines, the following statistics will reveal.

Between the years **1912 to 1921** there were many moving picture houses tucked away in the back streets of the South Side, most of which lay in the **Parliamentary Division of Central Edinburgh**, one of the most densely populated Divisions in Great Britain. At the **1921 Census** the Division had a population of 68,463; 22,203 in St Giles Ward; 23,371 in George Square Ward; and 22,889 in St Leonard’s Ward. As a measure of density of population, there were 45 persons per acre in St Giles Ward and 51 persons per acre in George Square Ward at the **1961 Census**, compared with 14 persons per acre for Edinburgh as a whole. By the 1950’s much of the property in the St. Leonard’s area was in a poor state, some of which could best be described as in a ruinous condition. It came as no surprise to the citizens when, on Saturday November 21st **1959**, the tenement in Beaumont Place nick-named the ***Penny Tenement*** collapsed.

Information is given in the following pages about the following 16 picture houses, unless otherwise stated:

Abbey Picture House, North Richmond Street, opened 1921

Cinema House, 18 Nicolson Street, opened 1911

La Scala, 50 Nicolson Street, opened 1912 – See page 23

New Palace Cinema, 20 High Street, opened 1929

New Victoria, 7 Clerk Street, opened 1930

Oddfellows’ Hall, Forrest Road, 1903 – See page 33

Operetta House, 5 Chambers Street, 1900 – See page 27

People’s Picture House, 19 Blackfriars Street, 1913 Street Directory

Roxburgh, Drummond Street (1 and 3 Roxburgh Street), opened 1920

Salisbury Picture House (formerly the Livingstone Hall), 38 South Clerk Street, opened 1925

Silver Kinema, opened 1913 and The Lyric, opened 1914, 30 Nicolson Square

Star Picture House, 16 St Mary’s Street, 1915 Kinematograph Year Book - See page 30

Tron Picture House, opened 1913 and Royal, opened 1928, 241 High Street

Waverley Picture House, 6 Infirmary Street, 1915 Kinematograph Year Book

ABBEY PICTURE HOUSE, North Richmond Street (EN Saturday, 6 August 1921)

“6.30 to 10.30 Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday
Romantic Drama featuring **Bessie Barriscale** in *The Painted Soul*
The Fatal Fortune
The Great Fight Jim Higgins V Pete Herman Bantam Weight Champions”

Note: This is the only advertisement I ever saw for the *Abbey*.

A draw for ‘lucky’ numbers was made at the interval, for which ‘prizes’ were exchanged. This type of ‘gimmick’ was not unusual in those far off days. Saturday matinee for Children cost 1d., the usual charge in most of the ‘little’ picture houses, which was the category in which the *Abbey* found itself. Competition was fierce, especially with the *Operetta House* close by.

CINEMA HOUSE, 18 Nicolson Street (EN Monday, 11 September 1911)

Cinema House 18 Nicolson Street (opposite Empire Theatre)

**Continuous performance daily from 2.30
Monday, Tuesday & Wednesday**

The stirring cowboy drama *The Call of the Open Range*

Afternoon teas served gratis to all visitors between 3.30 and 5.30

Admission: 6d and 1s.”

The *Cinema House*, next door to the Surgeons’ Hall, was the first picture house to institute ‘continuous’ performances, from 2.30 to 10.30. Their offering to provide a free ‘cuppa’ to ‘visitors’ was a novelty.

Standing Only I well remember the occasion I paid a visit to the *Cinema House* to see for the second time *Quo Vadis*; it was a Saturday afternoon and

when I was admitted it was ‘Standing Only’. From my vantage point I observed a child, unaccompanied, comfortably seated from opening time until about six o’clock. He saw the show twice [Methinks the author also saw the show twice that day G.F.B.] and called for a cup of tea and two biscuits, all the while ignoring the notice on the screen, “All patrons who have witnessed the entire programme are earnestly requested to vacate their seats in favour of those standing.” All for 3d., and 6d. for adults, that is, those who were ‘doon’ stairs.

The Tireless Pianist Who could forget the lady pianist pounding away on the ‘ivories’; my goodness, there was no let up for her, or for any of her colleagues in other houses. She had to switch from the tender love scene to imitate the thundering hooves of horses out in the *Wild West*. The sound of shooting was simply the sound of a cane being brought down sharply on a leather covered chair, or a drum was brought into service when a battle scene was being enacted to imitate the ‘roar’ of the guns.

You see, I was at the ‘flicks’ before the dawn of the 20th Century; before motor cars were commonplace, in Edinburgh at least; before Marconi had his wireless working; before Radio, ach, before anything that now is. Yet those early days of the Silent Moving Pictures will remain with me as a fond memory till the end of the road. That I was, at one time or another, in some awful joints, I do not deny; for the very good reason there ‘wis nae ither place tae go tae’.

Extract from the **1915 Kinematograph Year Book** page 468 “Cinema House, 18 Nicolson Street Proprietor: North British Electric Theatres. Seats: 550”

The following Press Advertisement (**EN Saturday, 24 May 1930**) is the only one of its kind I can recall out of **many dozens** I have scrutinised throughout this history.

“Cinema House September 11, 1911 May 24, 1930
On the last day of the Cinema House 18 Nicolson Street
The management desire to extend to all patrons, old and new, their
appreciation of their support during the many years this theatre has
been in existence
C.Drysdale, Manager
Today Mildred Harris in *Sea Fury* also *The Love of the Atlantic*”

Salvation Army

The **Salvation Army** took possession of the old *Cinema House* and on April 5th 1935, **Lady Sands**, wife of **Lord Sands**, a Senator of the High Court of Judiciary, opened Congress Hall. **Lord Wark**, also a Senator of the High Court, was the Chairman at the meeting.

NEW PALACE CINEMA, 20 High Street (EN Monday, 14 October 1929)

“Grand Opening 15th October 1929

New Palace opposite John Knox’s house 18-20 High Street

First presentation in Edinburgh

***The Great Picture* all talking, singing, comedy and dancing
with Belle Bennett and a great talking cast *Her New Chauffeur*
other supporting colossal attractions**

Tuesday, 15th October by ticket only at 2 p.m.

Open to public, 5.30 prices: 4d., 6d., 9d. & 1s.”

On page 8 of this issue of the News appeared a picture of the New Palace Cinema “Will seat 1,100 Both Talking and Silent.”

1938 *Cinema Buyers’ Guide* page 173 “New Palace, High Street (Edinburgh)

Proprietor: J.L.Lucas Seats: 1,050”

[The words “New Palace Cinema” are incised in stone above the shop at 20 High Street. G.F.B.]

NEW VICTORIA, 7 Clerk Street I was convalescing after yet another breakdown of War wounds, but had the good fortune to pay a visit to the *New Victoria* on its opening day. The main picture *Rookery Nook* was one of those pictures that one remembers and keeps remembering, and I am writing in November 1963. But to get on with the story (EN Saturday, 23 August 1930)

**“New Victoria Tremendous opening performance
includes Ralph Lynn and Tom Walls in
Rookery Nook the celebrated Aldwych farce**

Leslie James on the mighty Wurlitzer organ

**Opening on Monday next August 25, at 2.30 p.m.
by Sir Samuel Chapman, M.P.**

The New Victoria Symphony Orchestra under the direction of ‘Sam’

**Screen snapshots, variety acts, movietone news
on Western Electric apparatus**

Prices : Matinee up to 4.30 p.m. Front Stalls, 6d., children, 4d.; Back Stalls, 8d., 4d.; Balcony, 1s., 6d.

Prices: Evening Front Stalls, 8d, children, 4d. ; Back Stalls, 1s., 6d.; Balcony, 1s.3d., 8d.; Front Circle, 1s.6d.; Box Seats, 2s. 4d. Public Holidays excepted”

The Organ (New Victoria Brochure) The mighty Wurlitzer Organ, which is mounted on an electric lift, is a complete orchestra in itself. It is known as the **Special Ten Rank Wurlitzer Unit Orchestra**, and is one of the very few organs in existence containing the brilliant English horn stop. Apart from the pipes, the organ contains many effects – xylophone, sleigh bells, glockenspiel, and the full compass vibrophone.

The *New Vic* could seat 1,999.

**PUBLIC NOTICE NEW VICTORIA CINEMA EDINBURGH (EN
Saturday 8 February 1936)**

It Has Come To The Knowledge Of The Proprietors That Some Persons Have Declared That There Are Rats At The Above. There Is No Truth In The Rumours Which Have Been Circulated As The Following Statement Testifies, viz, "I Have To State That In View Of Rumours That Rats Were Present In The New Victoria Picture House, I Had A Careful Examination Made In Every Part Of The Premises On 20th December Last (1935) But There Was No Evidence Whatsoever Of The Presence Of These Vermin (Signed) Allan W. Ritchie, Chief Sanitary Engineer. NOTICE Is Accordingly Hereby Given That Proceedings Will Be Taken Against Any Person Making Or Repeating Any Statement Contrary To The Facts As So Certified. By Order."

***PEOPLE'S PICTURE HOUSE, OR PICTURE THEATRE, 19
Blackfriars Street***

I never found a Press advertisement for this house. In the **1913** *Street Directory* it was mentioned as "People's Picture House." In the **1915** *Kinematograph Year Book*, page 468, the entry for it was "Picture Theatre, 19 Blackfriars Street; Proprietor: C.W.Johnson"

Old residents in the district assured me that this picture house opened in **1912** and closed in **1915**. The First World War was the cause of many one man businesses closing down.

ROXBURGH, Drummond Street (1-3 Roxburgh Place) The Roxburgh was a family house in every sense; it catered for the young and the young in heart. That the **Roxy**, as it was called in the 1920's, played a useful social role in the very heart of the *Sooth Side*, is undoubted. A number of my old *Sooth Side* colleagues were anxious to know if it was my intention to include the **Roxy** in the history of Edinburgh cinemas. On being told that the **Roxburgh** was well to the fore, each one, in turn, expressed his thanks. That sentiment applied to a number of picture houses in this manner, "Aye I remember the old....", mentioning the name of the picture house that was uppermost in their minds.

Sentiment is a strong trait in our way of living. It applies to our first school, our street, our picture house, our battalion of the Territorials, all demanding our loyalty and allegiance. Alas, it was such picture houses as the *Roxy*, the *Op*, the *Starry* and the *TollX*, all in closely crowded areas, that received our allegiance.

***THE ROXBURGH DRUMMOND STREET* (EN Monday, 29 December 1919)**

Opening on New Year's day (Thursday January 1st 1920)

with an all-star programme of pictures including

William Faversham & Barbara Castleton in *The Silver King*

**6.30 continuous performance 10.30
New Year's day, continuous from 3"**

Preview of the Roxburgh (EN Tuesday, 30 December 1919) "The Roxburgh Picture House in Drummond Street will open on Thursday (January 1st 1920) under the manager-ship of Mr W. Lewis Brown, who, during the War, held a commission in the Royal Scots.

The building has been reconstructed and redecorated, and accommodates about 500.

PLASTER SCREEN

A special feature is the plaster screen which is built in. The opening picture should be a sufficient draw in itself, the feature film being: *The Silver King*."

During **George Webster's** tenure as manager at the Roxburgh, 1922/23, he introduced a series of *Tuesday Jazz Nights*. One of the bands to appear was the *Four Asters*; their vocalist was **Tom Oswald**, now M.P. for Central Edinburgh in **1963**.

SALISBURY PICTURE HOUSE, 38 South Clerk Street (formerly the Livingstone Hall) (EN Thursday, 17 December 1925)

“Edinburgh’s latest cinema the Salisbury Picture House

Opening date – Thursday, 17th December 1925 continuous from 6.30

**A first-class cinema furnished in first-class style
for patrons with first-class taste**

**Special opening attraction
The Sea Hawk by Rafael Sabatini
Admission: 1s., 9d. and 6d.”**

1938 *Cinema Buyers’ Guide* Page 173 Seats: 1,040”

FIRE SALISBURY PICTURE HOUSE, SOUTH CLERK STREET (EN Tuesday, 14 February 1939): “Considerable damage was done by fire early this morning.”

In 1943, Messrs Brown, 31 South Clerk Street, took over the premises as a furniture store; that seems to be one of the most common fates for old cinemas.

SILVER KINEMA HOUSE, 30 Nicolson Square (EN Monday, 15 September 1913)

“Silver Kinema House, 30 Nicolson Square ‘phone 7877 CEN

Week commencing, Monday September 15, 1913

Daily thereafter from 2 till 10.30 p.m.

Picture *The Rival Airmen*

Change of programmes – Mon. & Thurs.

Most Elaborately Furnished and Decorated House in the City

Director of Music – R. Dearblitz Beautiful Boudoir – Tea Lounge

**Prices: Box seats, 1s.6d., Grand Circle, 1s.,
Upper Circle, 9d., Fauteils, 6d.
Children half-price till 5.30”**

Within the year the War started on August 4th 1914; and there were, only too true, Rival Airmen.

THE SILVER KINEMA (EN Tuesday, 16 September 1913) “The new South Side house, the Silver Kinema, was crowded yesterday afternoon and evening. *The Rival Airmen* claimed first place on the programme, and in it many thrilling incidents were shown. *The Niagara Falls* is beautifully coloured and of more than usual length and interest. *Max and His Rival* and *The Amateur Photographers* and *Jim’s Little Wife* are amusing comedies. The programme is completed with a Wild West drama and Animated Gazette.”

Well, the patrons of 50 years ago certainly got quantity, if not quality.

SILVER KINEMA NICOLSON SQUARE (EN Thursday, 18 December 1913)

2 TODAY 10.30

GRAND OPENING EDISON’S KINETOPHONE

TALKING PICTURES

**The Most Marvellous Invention Of The Age, Shown Before
Their Majesties THE KING AND QUEEN**

Visited by 40,000 People at LA SCALA, GLASGOW, in one week

USUAL PRICES”

EN Tuesday, 28 April 1914 Last advertisement for the *Silver Kinema* prior to the opening of *The Lyric* on Saturday, August 15th 1914.

***THE LYRIC, 30 Nicolson Square* (EN Friday, 14 August 1914)**

**“THE LYRIC, 30 NICOLSON SQUARE
(LATE THE SILVER KINEMA)**

Opens Saturday first - 15 August 1914 3 till 10.15

Prices: 6d. and 9d. A few reserved seats, 1s.”

On page 2 of this issue of the *News* is a photograph of *The Lyric*.

1915 Kinematograph Year Book, page 93, there was this reference to the *Lyric*: “New Companies Registered During the Year to August 1914: Lyric Picture Theatre (Edinburgh) Ltd. Capital £800 in £1 shares.”

I understand that the introduction of the ‘talkies’ put paid to the Lyric in **1930**. I do know that Messrs. Parker (Bristo) used the old cinema as a furniture store.

***TRON PICTURE HOUSE, 241 High Street* (EN Tuesday, 15 April 1913)**

“TRON PICTURE HOUSE

**“Grand opening by Lady Radford on Thursday, April 17, 1913,
at three o’clock (by invitation only)**

From 6.30 that day – open to the public

Continuous performance daily from 2 p.m. till 10.30

Complete change of pictures Mondays & Thursdays

**Seize this opportunity of witnessing this unique entertainment of
incomparable brilliance.**

A vision of the world – from sky-blue to purple – deep

A high-class orchestra will provide appropriate music.

**Prices: Front Stalls, 4d.; Centre Stalls, 6d.; Lounge Stalls, 9d.;
Reserved seats, 3d. extra to all parts.**

**Children Half-Price to all Parts until 6 p.m.
when accompanied by an Adult.**

**The Ventilation, Heating, and Lighting of this House
Has Been Done On The Most Up-To-Date Plans**

TAKE THE TRAM TO THE TRON”

EN Tuesday, 22 April **1913** “This, the latest addition to the already numerous picture houses in the city, is proving a great attraction in the High Street district, and was visited by a large number of people yesterday. The principal film for the early part of the week is a society drama entitled *As In A Looking Glass*, and *Reward for Broncho Billy*, *Calamity Ann’s Vanity Comic*, *A Day In The Life Of A New Recruit*.”

“**1915 Kinematograph Year Book** Page 468 Seats: 600.”

EN Saturday, 22 August **1943** Article “How Talkies Came To Town”

In **1912** the first attempt at mechanical synchronisation of vision with sound were made in Edinburgh. It was in the Tron Picture House, High Street, where a gramophone was installed that was worked in conjunction with the film, though the timing was dependent on the human element. The person in charge of the gramophone had to endeavour to keep his machine running at the same speed as a moving clock-hand which could be seen turning round in one corner of the screen”

The writer was wrong in stating that the experiment took place in **1912**, as the Tron did not open until **1913**.

EN Friday, 1 June **1928** last advertisement for the *Tron*; the *Royal Cinema* opened on the same site on December 27th **1928**.

ROYAL CINEMA, 241, High Street (EN Thursday, 27 December 1928)

“The Royal Cinema 241 High Street (late Tron)

Under new management

Two great pictures

December 27 – 28 – 29, Thursday-Friday-Saturday

***Why Sailors Go Wrong* with Sammy Cohen and Ted MacNamara
*A REAL SCREAM***

Also Tom Mix & Tony, the Wonder Horse in *Dare Devil’s Reward*

Do Not Miss Seeing These Pictures

SATURDAY MATINEE from 12 Noon

PRICES: 3d, 4d, 6d, & 1s. AFTER 4 p.m.: 4d., 6d, 8d. & 1s.”

Note: The *Royal* closed down within 12 months.

WAVERLEY PICTURE HOUSE, 6 Infirmary Street

There is a beautiful story of the 90 and 9 sheep which were safely gathered into the fold, but **one** was missing having strayed far from the Shepherd’s kindly care...In some respects the *Waverley* Picture House was the one that strayed in Edinburgh. The story of the *Waverley* might well have been extracted from Ripley’s famous series, ‘Believe It Or Not’; the reader will be the judge.

There were, are, many Edinburgh picture houses which merit being described as ‘lousy’; the chief of which was the *Waverley* Picture House. Indeed, it gloried in the name ‘The Penny Scratcher’.

Fleas In a recent TV programme (November 1963) **Mary Marquis** interviewed **Dr Dunnet** on the subject of fleas. He told her he was going on a three months’ expedition to the Antarctic and hoped to bring back thousands of fleas. Had Dr Dunnet paid a visit to the *Waverley* he would

have had no difficulty in ‘collecting’ without any effort on his part, as fleas caused the *Waverley* to be known as ‘The Penny Scratcher’

Never advertised The *Waverley* never advertised in the local Press; nevertheless, its nickname was a by-word in the city. Fortunately, the *Waverley* was entered in the **1915 Kinematograph Year Book**, page 468: “Waverley Picture House, 6 Infirmary Street. Proprietor: J. McMahon.”

It is only since I started to write the history of Edinburgh Entertainments that I became intrigued with the name *Penny Scratcher*. On asking what was the name of the alleged picture house? Where was it located? I could get no definite answers. In course of time it became a myth; in this case an old wives’ tale and a legend in the cinema industry.

The entry about the Waverley in the **1915 Year Book** did not convey very much to me. However, on calling on my good friend Bailie **George Hedderwick**, in business as a chemist at No 54 Blackfriars Street, about some Town Council matter, the conversation turned to Edinburgh cinemas. I asked him if he could supply me with information about *The Penny Scratcher*. Over a period of time Bailie Hedderwick asked questions of his numerous customers and gradually bits of information emerged that fell into some semblance of order.

While the address is given as 6 Infirmary Street in the *1915 Kinematograph Year Book*, there was another Entrance/Exit in Robertson’s Close, 263 Cowgate. This Close runs between the Cowgate and Infirmary Street and is near the **Edinburgh Working Men’s Club and Institute**. To the North of the Cowgate end of the Close stands a large Transformer Station.

I am indebted to Bailie Hedderwick for putting me in touch with several old residents who had lived in the district for upward of 60 years. I met them on Friday, 5th October **1962**, one at a time, and put the same set of questions to each of them.

1. Did you ever go to McMahon’s Picture House in Infirmary Street?
2. Did you ever get into the Picture House by handing over a jelly jar?
3. Did McMahon ever accept rags as the price of admission?

They all answered ‘Yes’ to each of these questions. All agreed the cash price of admission was 1d. and 2d., but none of them ever paid 2d. They might pay 1d. if they had one, and take the opportunity to dodge into the 2d. seats.

They confirmed that by ‘handing ower a 1 lb. jeelie jaur ye goat in tae the front seats.’; these seats had no backs. For a 2 lb. jelly jar you were admitted to the back seats, which had backs, and were given an orange. A handful of rags secured entry to the front seats.

Mr McMahon brought joy to many a child, who might never have seen the *Wild West* or the *Keystone Kops*, but for a Jelly Jaur or a ‘puckle of rags’.

Scratchers and the Dardanelles

Many picture houses in Edinburgh were ‘lousy’, and richly deserved to be called ‘scratchers’; that was inevitable; but not nearly as lousy as I and my comrades were at the Dardanelles at the time the Scratcher was open early **1915**, and just on the point of ‘packing up’.

FIRST WORLD WAR

A number of South Side young men served with me in the same Territorial regiment, the 5th Royal Scots, whose Headquarters were in Forrest Road Drill Hall. That the young men from the district, in too many cases, paid the supreme sacrifice can be seen from the Roll of Honour at the Tolbooth in the Royal Mile.

One of their number, **Robert Wilson**, a news vendor in civilian life, won the greatest honour which our country can bestow upon a member of the Armed Forces: The Victoria Cross.

And so, another facet of the *Sooth Side* has been told. Many of the dreadful tenements were demolished in the late **1950’s** and the early **1960’s**, but much remains to be done, before God’s fresh air can circulate freely in the district.

WHAT THE HIGH STREET WAS LIKE IN THE YEAR 1913

I was nearing the end of my apprenticeship as a house-painter with the firm of Archibald Selkirk, Gilmore Place, who had the **entire** city contract for painting. As a consequence I came to know every nook and cranny, not only in the Royal Mile, but throughout the city wherever there was town property.

In 1913 the New Council Chamber was nearing completion; the City Museum was then in the City Chambers. The East and West Wings of the Chambers were built in the 1920's; the East Wing took in the Royal/Tron cinema.

The Cable Tram Car along with the Horse Cab were the principal modes of travel. The Fire Engine and Police Ambulance were also horsedrawn. Indeed, it was not until **1926** that the Police set up a Special Traffic Department consisting of two motor cycles with side cars and four men (this information was supplied by the Chief Constable). In 1913 the motor car was not a menace; children could still play in the streets.

There were no Police Boxes; the first was introduced in **1933**; nor Traffic Lights, the first set were installed in **1928** at Broughton Street.

Soon, all too soon, *Hogmany* will have no meaning to Edinburgh children. It was in the High Street that Hogmany was celebrated at the Tron Church on the last day of the old year, where, aye in 1913, many thousands would congregate to bring in the New Year. Strangers would offer the bottle of friendship to other strangers and thus become brither Scots. On the stroke of 12 much merrymaking and toasting good health was the order of the first hour of the newly born year. Thereafter the huge crowd would turn their backs on the Tron Church and make for their respective destinations by the four points of the compass. There were no motor cars in the vicinity, even in 1913, to obstruct the swaying mass of humanity proceeding towards Register House. I think car owners at that time had the 'wind up' to venture near the Tron, knowing full well what the crowd would be like.

One of the features of the pre-1914 War in the High Street and North Bridge was the number and variety of Barrow Vendors; literally everything from a needle to an anchor could be bought. One Edinburgh writer claims that it was the advent of the motor car which drove those colourful merchants off the streets. I would argue, however, that it was the Merchants of Edinburgh who were responsible for doing so, particularly the small shopkeepers who,

after the First World War, complained of unfair trading from the hawkers who did not pay rates.

Most significant of all, Christmas was not commercialised; this did not happen until the late 1940's.

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