

The 1947 Referendum on Sunday Opening of Bishop's Stortford's Cinemas.

By Jim Paterson

The Bishop's Stortford Museum is home to a great many items relating to the social history of the town including the development of pubs, clubs and cinemas.

One particularly interesting episode takes place in 1947 when Bishop's Stortford held a local referendum to decide if the town's two cinemas would be allowed to open on a Sunday.



Bishop's Stortford had two cinemas at that time, both owned by Earnest E. Smith. The oldest one was the Phoenix which originally opened in 1911 in South Street, where WHSmith's is now, and The Regent which opened in 1931, also on South Street, where Marks and Spencer is now located. This month's 'object of the month' which is on display at the Rhodes Arts Centre and Museum, is a scrapbook collated by the Smith family containing newspaper articles and flyers pertaining to the referendum plus the original programmes for the Phoenix and Regents Cinemas for November 1947 when the vote actually took place.

Cinema openings were first regulated in 1909 and amended in 1932 under the Sunday Entertainments Act. This put in place a process which allowed the local authority to consult the public and if approved provide the cinema a license to open on a Sunday.

Bishop's Stortford Urban District Council commenced the consultation process in October 1947 when a public meeting was held at the Water Lane Institute. The meeting was poorly attended and

the vote was 26 for and 69 against Sunday Opening. Surprisingly the main advocates for the change was the Trades Union Council who argued that it would help shift workers and keep young people off the street and out of the pub. Their spokesman also stated that young people thought the town 'a perfect dump' on a Sunday because there was little to do. Against was the churches with all denominations arguing to 'keep Sunday special'. A Mrs Miller argued that from 'a woman's point of view will you not leave us one day of the week when they can enjoy their own family in their own home'. A Mr Stevens declared that 'go and see a murder' on a Sunday was the wrong message to send to youngsters. Surprisingly Mr Smith the local Cinema owner was firmly against the proposal as he did not have the staff and did not want to force 7 day working. Mr Smith told the meeting he would not open on Sunday even if the resolution passed. This annoyed the Trades Council who wished him stripped of his current entertainment licence.

Despite the defeat at the public meeting the pro campaigners had the right to call a referendum if they could get the backing of 100 voters. This they duly achieved and a referendum was held on Saturday 15th November 1947. Incidentally in November 1947 the Regent was showing Bette Davis latest film, 'Deception' and the Phoenix featured older films starring Roy Rodgers, Flannigan and Allen and Shirley Temple.

The referendum turnout was 29% with 505 for the proposal and 1,977 against. A heavy defeat which meant that Stortfordians could not visit the Cinema in their home town on a Sunday until 1966 after a second public meeting (35 attendees) voted in favour and the required 100 voters needed to force a second referendum could not be found.

Researched and written by Jim Paterson

Jim has volunteered at museum for around 18 months after retiring from job in City two years ago. Jim catalogues new donations which the museum receives from the public and has developed and presented a new museum walk on the history of Stortford Cinemas, Dance halls and Clubs. Relocating from Edinburgh to the area in 2001, Jim has an Economic History degree and has always been interested in all aspects of the subject. Since retiring Jim has visited the Zulu battlefields in South Africa and Pompeii in Italy.