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THE CINEMA
THEATRE
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NO. 40
2015
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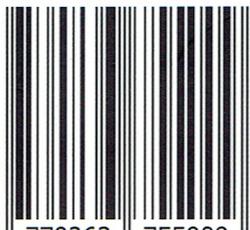
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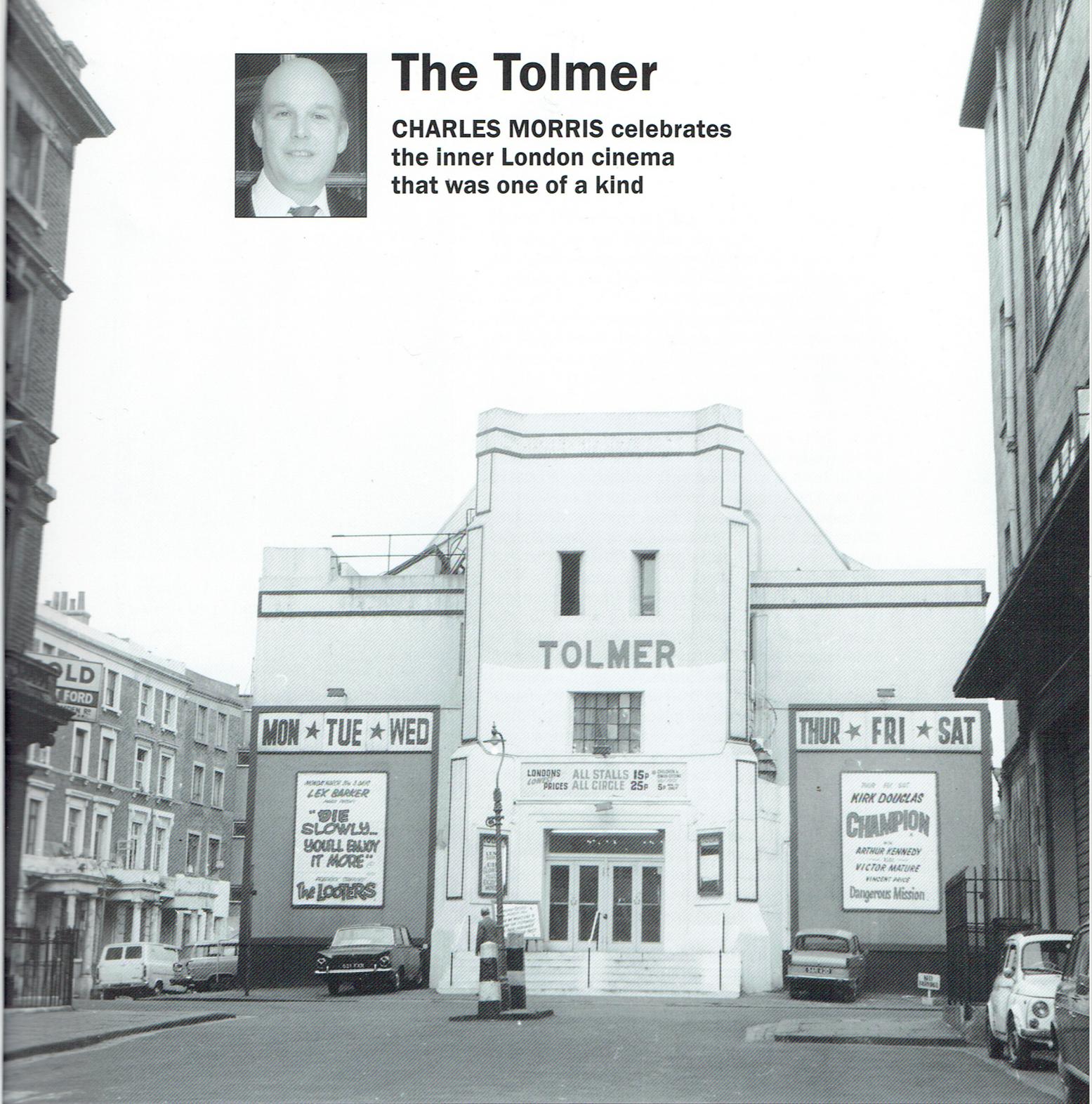
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The Tolmer

CHARLES MORRIS celebrates
the inner London cinema
that was one of a kind



In London's Tottenham Court Road, classed with regard to entertainment as part of the "outer West End", there were once several cinemas. At the south, near Oxford Street, was the Dominion, still in operation today as a live venue. Progressing north there were the Sphere News Theatre, the Grand Central (later Bijou), the Carlton (later Berkeley), the Majestic (later Continentale), the Embassy and, finally, the grandest of them all - the 2,500 seat Paramount (later the Odeon). A mere 200 yards further north, however, was a cinema so different in style and location that the intersecting Euston Road might just as well have been the Berlin Wall.

The Tolmer cinema was in Tolmers Square, directly to the west of Euston Station and sandwiched between Hampstead Road (the extension of Tottenham Court Road) and North Gower Street. It reigned from 1924 to 1972, with a few years' interruption during the war.

The respected former *Observer* film critic Philip French once recalled: "...I nearly wept in May 1972 driving into London from Stanstead after some months of teaching in Texas and passing two of my favourite cinemas, both closed in my absence. One was the magnificent Astoria, Finsbury Park, beloved of John Betjeman, which is now a Pentecostal church... The second was the Tolmer, across Euston Road from Warren Street station. It reeked of cigarette smoke and disinfectant and always showed double bills."

Noted film director Mike Leigh, when once asked to name his favourite cinema (*The Independent On Sunday*, 17 April 1994), was equally nostalgic but rather more candid: "The Tolmer, in Tolmers Square, close to Euston station. It's been dead for some time. I suppose it lasted until the mid seventies. It was in fact an old church, which was apparently haunted. It was the cheapest cinema in London. The last time I

The Tolmer at closing in 1972. (Main photograph and author inset by Allen Eyles.) See also back cover.

The church prior to being converted into the Tolmer cinema.

went it was two shillings to get in. It was grotty. The seats were very tightly packed together. Certain sections you couldn't sit in because it was where the tramps sat. It smelt of urine. But for the film student it was a brilliant place. It was fantastically cheap and you could catch up on all sorts of films there, they'd grab anything and show it - epics, westerns, anything and everything. Architecturally it was early-to-mid 19th century. But the spire had been chopped off and it had been painted in gloss. It was horrid. It was an old shit hole actually. It was a joy. There was and is nothing like it. In terms of movie-going, for a serious film-buff, it was brilliant."

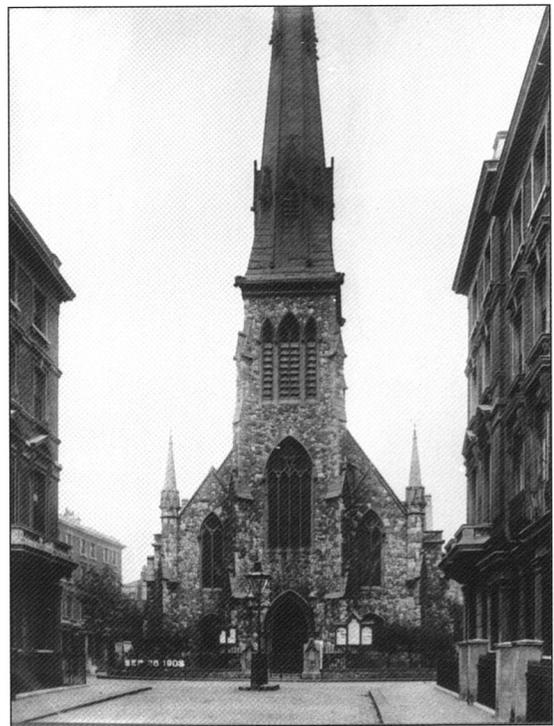
That succinct description effectively sums it up but readers might like a few details of what was, in its own particular way, probably the most characterful of London's cinemas.

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Given the history of its location, the Tolmer probably had little choice to be other than the type of cinema it was. The immediate area lies in what were the grounds of the large old manor of Tottenham, or Tottenham Court, in the Parish of St Pancras. In the seventeenth century it became a favourite place of excursion for Londoners. An early hint of its later character came in 1645 when "Mrs Stacey's maid and two others were fined one shilling apiece for the enormity of drinking on the Sabbath day at Tottenham Court". A play of the same period by Thomas Nabbs, called *Tottenham-Court, a Pleasant Comedy*, suggests that Tottenham Court was more than anything else a good place for a cheerful dirty weekend! By 1718 there were two celebrated pubs either side of Hampstead Road, the King's Head and the Adam and Eve, of which the latter was famous for the boxing matches that took place there and in the 1930s it was said to have the best beer and the cheapest girls in the West End!

Towards Warren Street were the grounds of the Tottenham Court Fair, also famous for its boxing matches and the chaos it generated every summer. A manuscript of 1808 describes Tottenham Court as "a place of resort for the lower orders of society" and goes on to describe how "several lewd and disorderly persons and players of interludes had erected booths...wherein was used a great deal of prophane [sic] swearing together with many lewd and blasphemous expressions..." and how a warrant was eventually issued for the activities to be suppressed and the booths pulled down.

In 1756 the "New Road from Paddington to Islington" (now the Marylebone, Euston and Pentonville Roads) was built and led to the rapid development of the area. Some prestigious houses were built, particularly along the New Road itself, but despite covenants prohibiting occupants of nearby streets from "following the trade of brewer, bagnio keeper, distiller, pipeburner, melting tallow chandler [and several other trades] or any other offensive or obnoxious trade", the area never enjoyed the social status of the exclusive Bedford Estate to the south-east. Such gentility as there may have been vanished in the social decline that hit all the housing north of the New Road in the middle of the nineteenth century. This was principally due to the coming of the railways and the stations (Euston, King's Cross and St Pancras) which caused both a demand for housing for those employed on the railways and the displacement of people from their homes in the path of the stations and the lines leading into them. Such feeble statutory provision as there was for rehousing



of tenants displaced was easily and regularly evaded. Thus, between the stations and to the west of Euston a belt of poor and overcrowded housing grew up along the north of New Road. By the end of the nineteenth century it was one of the worst slum areas of London.

Tolmers Square, in the path of this development, nevertheless has a slightly different history. One story says that there was a burial pit on the site at the time of the Great Plague, but there is no real evidence to support this. In 1802 the New River Company, which worked an artificial waterway from Hertfordshire to the New River Head in Islington, took a lease on the land and converted it into a reservoir for the supply of water to west London and in the 1830s an Artesian well was sunk on the site. In the 1840s a complex of public baths and wash houses for the poor was built on the north-east corner of the site, served by water from the reservoir. A press report of the time was most enthusiastic: "Pent up by their occupations in the midst of London, a large proportion of its vast population can only on rare occasions find time to go the necessary distance to obtain the advantage of a bath and the comfort of a clean skin... The comfort of a warm bath is placed out of their reach by its costliness, and to procure a warm bath at home, which is never thought of except when disease make it necessary, is almost an impossibility..." It seems, however, that the labouring classes were not altogether eager to take advantage of the excellent arrangements offered to them and in 1859 the wash houses were closed.

The houses in the Square were erected by a builder called William Sawyer between 1861 and 1864. Simultaneously, the Tolmers Square Congregational Church was built in the middle of the Square. This was a Gothic edifice designed by John Tarring, responsible for a number of other Non-conformist churches in London. It had a spire at the west end some 120 feet high and was highly praised by the contemporary press; one newspaper described it in a style "somewhat after that of the House of Commons". It was fairly clear from the architecture that the houses in the Square were intended to be rather more genteel than the streets to the east; in fact, it is said that originally there were gates at the entrance on the east side to the scruffier Drummond and

Euston streets, the main entrance being from the rather more affluent Hampstead Road. But this did not really achieve its object and within a few years of being built, although some 'posh-ish' people did live there, the four-storey houses in the Square had mostly degenerated into multi-occupation and overcrowding nearly as bad as the rest of the area.

The area attracted a number of charitable institutions, principal among them being the Tolmers Square Institute, an appendage of the church built in 1877 for meetings and good works. A contemporary press cutting stated: "The scene of the Euston Square murder is within a few minutes of the Institute, and recently, within a few yards, a man hacked his wife to death with a hatchet. More than one child has been found dead within the railings of the church, one with its throat cut. Wickedness abounds, and Tolmers Square Institute has been built to try and stem this torrent of iniquity." Not surprisingly, it was reported in about 1900 that the church "finds it something of a struggle to exist in so unpropitious a neighbourhood".

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Such was the neighbourhood into which the Tolmer cinema was born. The church, having given up the struggle shortly after the First World War, was converted by George John Smart in 1923 into the cinema, still with the spire attached, which opened in May 1924 with a Mrs Hodges as manageress. (Some sources suggest the building was first converted into a theatre in 1920.) Smart had already opened Smarts Hall in Bethnal Green (later the Rex and finally the Essoldo) and went on to acquire other cinemas in the East End.

In 1929 some significant alterations were made, including the removal of the spire. The *Kinema-tograph Weekly* (4 July) reported: "A very striking and pleasing attempt to break away from the usual stereotyped method of external decoration has just been completed at the Tolmer Kinema, Hampstead Road, of which George Smart is the proprietor. In place of the usual cream colour or stone finish, the whole of the exterior decoration has been carried out in a salmon colour, with a deep border of Pompeian red, whilst all the ornamented pendant and frieze work are picked out in black. In addition, a two-colour electric lighting system has been fixed around the top and sides of the frontage. The whole of the interior is also being redecorated, the large panels in the hall being picked out in a delicate pink, whilst the general colour scheme is Pompeian red. The whole of the decorative scheme has been carried out by A. E. Mortelmans, of Cloudesley Square, N.1., who was also responsible for the plaster work and decorative scheme at the newly-opened Tower Super Kinema, Tower Bridge Road." These improvements earned the cinema the soubriquet "Smart's smart hall".

At the same time, Mr F. A. Tillett was promoted to be the Tolmer's musical director, having been leader of the orchestra for some time. (It is quite surprising that the Tolmer should have boasted an orchestra rather than just a pianist.) He had had many years' experience at the Finsbury Park Kinema and prior to that at the King's Cross Cinema. He was also well known in south London due to his association with the Golden Domes and Empire cinemas at Camberwell.

This may have been an appointment of brief duration, not only because of the introduction of talkies that year but because, in the latter part of 1929, the Tolmer took delivery of a brand new

Wurlitzer 150SP 2-manual 5-rank organ; the SP signifying 'special' status, meaning in this case the inclusion of a vibraphone unit, which was not usually featured in organs of this type. And not many cinemas of this type would have possessed an organ.

Smart collected other cinemas, all in the East End of London, namely: the Poplar Pavilion; the Grand Central Hackney; the Trocadero Stratford; the Grand Palace Poplar; the Luxor Shoreditch; and the Imperial Canning Town. The latter had been burnt down in 1931 and was rebuilt to the designs of George Coles, re-opening in 1939. The Tolmer's Wurlitzer was transferred to the Imperial, which was almost immediately disposed of - in fact, it is difficult to determine whether the organ went to the cinema before it was sold or afterwards. It seems Smart was getting into some financial difficulty and in 1940 he appeared to have become bankrupt. The Tolmer, the Poplar Pavilion and the Luxor Shoreditch were then operated by A. H. Partridge as trustee but in 1941 all were closed, with the exception of the Poplar Pavilion which Mr Partridge continued to operate. It is possible that the bombing of the East End had drastically reduced attendances or that some of the cinemas were actually damaged or destroyed. The Tolmer itself had certainly been hit.

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In January 1944, the trustee (by this time, Leslie Arthur West) was released and the Tolmer was taken over by a new company, New Tolmer (1944) Ltd, whose principal was Ivor Pomson. Later reports suggest that the Pomson family had been in the cinema business since 1912 and that they had operated several London cinemas. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to establish where these were; opinions differ widely as to the locations and periods of ownership with no cinemas' names being recalled.

The Tolmer was restored and re-opened later in 1944, seating 1,000 with about 300 seats in the circle and the remainder in the stalls. It seems that the screen end of the cinema had been rebuilt and a new roof fitted, constructed of steel trusses overlaid with corrugated asbestos sheeting. In front of the stage there still remained an orchestra pit of some sort, railed off.

The cinema's entrance was at the west end, the original church entrance, with the tower and spire having been earlier severely truncated to below the belfry. The small foyer was reached by a short flight of steps and through two pairs of double doors. The kiosk was on the left and the paybox on the right. The stalls entrance was straight ahead, but before that stairs on the right led to the circle, passing a door to the first floor manager's office. Next to the office there was another door leading outside to an iron spiral staircase, partly concealed by the right-hand one of the original tower buttresses, up to the projection box located above the office. (Original church buttresses could also be seen on the side walls.) The fire escape from the box was on the other side; up a few steps and through a door to the outside, down a short ladder to a flat roof at the far end of which (at the top left of the frontage) was a doorway leading to some internal steps which eventually joined the emergency exit from the circle before reaching the street.

In the 1940s the projectors were Ross, with Western Electric 'Universal Base' soundheads and Kalee Vulcan arc lamps. As with most other installations of this type of equipment, we are told it was the habit of projectionists to speed up the



Church buttresses on the south-facing wall of the cinema. (Photographs by Allen Eyles, top, and Kevin Wheelan.)

projector if the film was running late or if they wanted to finish early! Later the equipment was replaced by Westar 2001 mechanisms, Westrex soundheads and Peerless 'Magnarc' arc lamps. 5,000ft spoolboxes were fitted, enabling almost an hour of film to be shown on each projector. Projectomatic, a device which enabled some automatic control of the projectors and ancillary equipment, was also fitted, as required by the London County Council for any cinemas wishing to operate 'single-manning'.

The Tolmer as seen from Hampstead Road. Only the bus stop survives. (Photograph by Allen Eyles.)

When CinemaScope was installed, a new screen frame and curtains were fitted in front of the proscenium arch, obscuring its sphinx-like motif. After this conversion, as with many cinemas, just two screen ratios were possible: CinemaScope and a 'flat' ratio of approximately 1.85:1. This meant that many of the older films could not be shown in their proper ratio and if the projectionist was not paying attention, it was quite possible to witness a conversation between headless people! The CinemaScope picture was a very respectable size, however. It is understood four-track magnetic sound was also a feature. Another interesting innovation

was a home-made motor-driven film re-winder, located behind the two windows at the top of the frontage. After it was set in motion, the film spool would re-wind steadily until it was finished, whereupon the end of the film would flap around, operating a microswitch which would turn it off. In combining the 20-minute reels onto larger spools it was customary, in latter days at least, for ease of subsequent breakdown, to identify the joins by overlaying a significant strip of opaque tape on the picture area of the film. This made it very obvious to the audience where the joins were.

Either side of the frontage were large poster boards advertising the weekday films. At one time these reached to the parapet, but after a serious accident to the doorman while pasting these up (the wooden ladder snapped in half and he broke his back), they were made smaller and more easily manageable. They were nevertheless still very prominent and in later years were commended by the editor of *CinemaTV Today* for their visibility from Hampstead Road. Eventually they were reduced to the size of those in the photographs in order to economise on the cost of producing the posters. Other publicity was via 50-odd weekly bespoke quad (40 inch x 30 inch) posters which were fly-posted round the district on temporary hoardings, weekly leaflets ('flyers') and local newspapers, with also a mention in *Time Out*, *What's On in London* and on BBC Radio London. Unlike nearly all other London cinemas, the Tolmer did not advertise in the *Evening News* or *Evening Standard*.

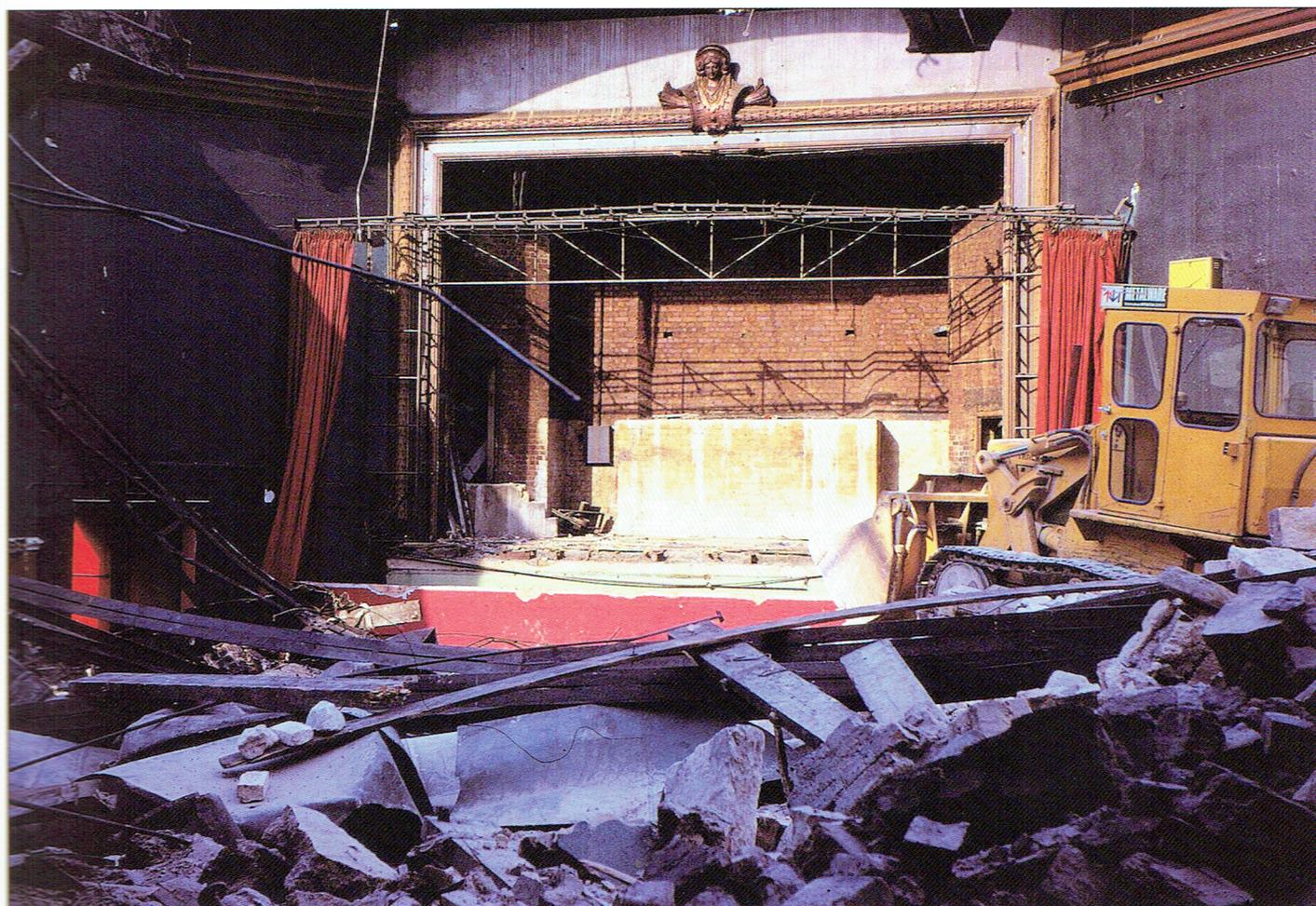
The cinema was immensely popular right up till the end. The programming was to a rigid pattern of double-bills (the two films, unusually, were not always from the same film distributor), other than where an exceptionally long film precluded any second feature in support. A Sunday-only programme was followed by a different one for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday and a further change for Thursday, Friday and Saturday. The weekday programmes normally allowed for three complete showings on a continuous basis, starting from about 1pm, or three of the main feature and two of the second feature, depending on the length of the films. The weekday films might be only a year old in some cases, but were typically between two





Left, a rare colour image of the Tolmer in 1967 taken by Ron Knee.

Below, this photograph of the Tolmer during demolition, the only known view of the interior, shows both the original proscenium arch and the frame of the screen installed in front of it for CinemaScope. (CTA Archive/ photograph by Marcus Eavis.)



Flyers from the 1960s. (Middle from Allen Eyles collection, actual size 135mm wide by 270mm tall.)

TOLMER CINEMA
 Tolmer Square, Hampstead Road, N.W.1
 (1 Minute Warren Street Station)
 PHONE: EUSTON 7578
 YOUR CHEAPEST & BEST HOUSE OF ENTERTAINMENT

SUNDAY, AUGUST 2nd one day only
 GEORGE MONTGOMERY MONA FREEMAN
HUK (A)
 DANA ANDREWS MEL TORRE
FEARMAKERS (A)

Monday, August 3rd for 3 days
 Steve Reeves Georgia Moll
THIEF OF BAGDAD (L)
 At 2.5 6.0 9.20
 HAROLD LLOYD'S
WORLD OF COMEDY (L)
 At 1.0 1.15 2.30

Thursday, August 6th for 3 days
 Richard Widmark Jeffrey Hunter
FROGMEN (U)
 At 3.0 6.10 9.0
 Gianna Maria Canale Massimo Serato
QUEEN OF THE PIRATES (L)
 At 1.35 1.40 2.15

SUNDAY, AUGUST 9th one day only
 JACK PALANCE EDDIE ALBERT
ATTACK (A)
 STEVE MCQUEEN DAVID CLARKE
GREAT ST. LOUIS BANK ROBBERY (A)

TOLMER CINEMA
 TOLMER SQUARE HAMPSTEAD ROAD, N.W.1
 (1 MIN. WARREN STREET STATION)
 PHONE: EUSTON 7578
 YOUR CHEAPEST & BEST HOUSE OF ENTERTAINMENT

Monday, October 13th for 3 days
 MAMIE VAN DOREN LORI NELSON
UNTAMED YOUTH (A)
 At 3.15 6.10 9.5
 JOHN AGAR MARLA ENGLISH
FLESH AND THE SPUR (A)
 In Colour
 At 1.45 4.35 7.30

Thursday, October 16th for 3 days
 RANDOLPH SCOTT
7 MEN FROM NOW (U)
 In Colour
 At 3.10 6.10 9.0
FERNANDEL JOINS THE ARMY (A)
 At 1.30 4.30 7.25

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 19th one day only
 TONY CURTIS
FORBIDDEN
 AND
 RICHARD FRASER
THE COBRA STRIKES (A)

NOTE THE PRICES 1/- & 1/6 CIRCLE 2/-

and five years old. 'X' certificate films were rarely shown, but when booked they would be during the early part of the week. In the 1940s the Universal News was included in the show.

Sunday programmes could be anything between ten and twenty years old and nearly always comprised a western plus an action film of some description. Despite the age of the films and there being only two performances (starting at 4pm in line with licensing requirements), and without the benefit of the same large-size poster at the front, Sunday was the busiest day of the week. The doors were opened half an hour before the start of the programme in order to deal with the queue, and an interval was scheduled, whereas on Mondays to Wednesdays about ten or fifteen minutes were allowed at the beginning (still enough to cope with a usually busy Monday matinee), with no official interval scheduled (just the advertisements and trailers), and only five minutes for Thursday to Saturday. There could well be one thousand patrons during the course of a Sunday and, from the records of 15 February 1970, inspected at random, they bought 329 items of sweets, 70 drinks, 140 ice creams, 40 packets of nuts and 23 packets of crisps, also 133 packets of cigarettes.

Due to the age of the films, most were hired at a flat rate instead of the usual percentage of box-office takings, though some of the newer selections were charged a percentage. A typical Sunday programme might be hired for £15 in the late 1960s. It seems the owners were in the habit of paying their bills at the last minute: the cinema was on a 'five day credit' list with some film distributors. Bob Skinner, working as a youth for Anglo Amalgamated Film Distributors, remembers having to take films to the Tolmer by taxi on the day of showing, evidently because the bill for the previous ones had only just been paid. (He was

also warned by his boss to wait in the foyer for the manager or projectionist, and not to enter the cinema due to the 'bad men' who frequented the cinema - of which, more later).

There were films to suit everybody. A double-bill of the Clint Eastwood spaghetti westerns *A Fistful of Dollars* and *For a Few Dollars More* played on a number of occasions to great effect, and for the final time in February 1971. For the discerning filmgoer there were attractions such as the Marx Bros' *Animal Crackers* coupled with Milos Forman's *The Fireman's Ball*. At the end of the same week, *Monkey Business*, another Marx Bros. film, was accompanied by two popular featurettes, *Futtock's End* and *A Home of Your Own*. Costa Gavras' acclaimed *Z*, *Midnight Cowboy* and *Oh! What A Lovely War* were among several notable films that appeared during the last couple of years. The Marx Bros' *Animal Crackers* was shown again in February 1972 (my first visit to the cinema when, unbeknown to me, it was only a few weeks from closure), and was unfortunately paired with *Queen of the Nile*, a rather dreary Italian 'sword and sandal' B picture from 1961 which was shown here as the main feature. *Kes* and the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine* made another attractive package which was screened in that period.

A notable absence from the schedules was the films from the Walt Disney studios. This was attributable to that distributor's insistence that the films played for a full week and all day too. And, probably, higher film rentals were a factor. The Tolmer did not overly cater for children, in any case. The original 'tuppenny rush' [old pence] of the 1920s eventually petered out in 1960 due to poor attendances and the Pomsons did not go out of their way to encourage unaccompanied children at other times because of the disturbance they might create and the risk to them from the

TOLMER CINEMA

TOLMER SQUARE HAMPSTEAD ROAD, N.W. 1
(1 MIN. WARREN STREET STATION)
PHONE: EUSTON 7576

YOUR CHEAPEST & BEST HOUSE OF ENTERTAINMENT

Monday, June 13th for 3 days

TONY CURTIS

APPOINTMENT WITH A SHADOW

Cinemascope

At 3.50 5.50 8.50 (A)

GINA LOLLOBRIGIDA

THE WAYWARD WIFE

At 1.15 4.20 7.20 Adults Only Cert. (X)

Persons under 16 will not be admitted to this programme

Thursday, June 16th for 3 days

GREGORY PECK

PORK CHOP HILL

At 3.10 5.55 8.45 (A)

MERRY ANDERS

THE DALTON GIRLS

At 1.45 4.30 7.30 (A)

SUNDAY, JUNE 19th one day only

TONY CURTIS SAL MINEO

SIX BRIDGES TO CROSS

AND (A)

JACK CARSON MICKEY ROONEY

MAGNIFICENT ROUGHNECKS

(U)

NOTE THE PRICES 1/- & 1/6 CIRCLE 2/6

other patrons they might meet.

A curious film choice in November 1971 was *Young Eagles*, starring vanished actors Carter Dixon, Bobby Cox and Jim Vance. It was a 1934 serial of twelve episodes which were shown one after the other in the same programme with a total running time of three-and-a-half hours. It was too long for three screenings to be accommodated, so a full hour was omitted from the first daily show! Looking back on the film's reviews, this was a blessing in disguise for that show's audience. Older films of a higher calibre shown in later years included *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon*, *Winchester '73*, *The Hustler* and *Shane*. Hundreds of other films have failed to withstand the test of time - both from the major distributors and smaller ones now largely forgotten, such as *Ritz*, *Eagle*, *Butcher's*, *Gala*, *Planet* and *Saxon*, also the various companies of the E.J. Fancey group (*Border*, *S.F.*, *DUK* and *New Realm*, the latter later finding fame and fortune distributing *Emmanuelle* in 1975).

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The Tolmer was described by *Time Out* magazine as "a haven for anyone who digs cinema but can't pay West End prices". They must surely have been able to afford the Tolmer, which boasted of being, and almost certainly was, the cheapest cinema in London. The prices when it closed were 15p in the stalls and 25p in the circle (only recently increased from 2/6d [12.5p] and 3/6d [17.5p] with pensioners and children admitted for 5p Monday to Friday). The King's Cross Cinema (former Odeon), a few hundred yards away, was charging 50p at that time. The patrons were deemed by others to include old-age pensioners, children, students, dossers and the unemployed. The last manager, Andrew Keeshan, also observed oddballs, some gays, hotel workers and

other night workers wanting something to do during the day. He also states that some people came from quite a distance away - Notting Hill and Westbourne Park - and one couple, who came from Croydon, along with other patrons visited the sherry house on the corner of the entrance of the Square, which was wood panelled, had barrels of sherry on the bar and a very authoritarian landlady!

Other patrons included prostitutes from Euston and King's Cross, not so much soliciting clientele (although this did sometimes happen) as seeking a break between assignments and shelter from the cold. The patronage of students is confirmed by one of them, Allen Eyles, who recalls: "I must have spent 10 minutes or more in the Gents, which I recollect as being over on the right hand side of the balcony, reading an expanse of cream-painted wall covered in dirty jokes and limericks in tiny, neat handwriting. They were so sophisticated there must have been rivalry between university students to put them there." According to handyman Henry Clark, from Belfast, the choice of film didn't matter much to a lot of people; they just came for a sit down or a sleep. If they enjoyed it they would applaud at the end. Some, however, used to come to every film the cinema offered; on Sunday, Monday and Thursday, when a new programme began, or on other regular days.

Some of the patrons were a bit antisocial in their habits. Echoing Mike Leigh's remarks, Paul Tribick, a student in the early 1970s: "I remember the broken seat backs - you had to check before you sat down, otherwise you could be in for a bit of a shock. Also you never put your hands under the seat or touched anything you didn't need to! Continuous performances meant there was usually loud snoring from the stalls. There were some quite smelly people there (smellier than students) whom you tried to avoid sitting near." (At one time a small notice in the paybox warned that people who fell asleep would be ejected; but it seems the only sanction put into effect in latter days was to wake up those who snored in the circle!)

Likewise, Veronica Hitchcock remembers: "I did not go to the Tolmer very often. It was not very inviting, to say the least. On the occasions I did go, I discovered that you could quite easily get in free because the side door - with a Push Bar to open - was very often wedged ajar and you could slip in unseen. The door was at the foot of a staircase where a number of down-and-outs would sit with their cider and meths and relieve themselves down the stairs from time to time. The smell knocked you sideways and the open door, I suppose, was an attempt at ventilation... The double bills one could see there were amazing, but you did need to see a film very desperately to brave the place, in much the same way a young heterosexual girl needed courage to enter the Biograph in Victoria, though for slightly different reasons."*

Most did use the proper facilities (there was no provision for ladies in the circle so they had to use the toilets downstairs) and there was a regular clanking of the panic bolts of the stalls' far left hand exit door as this also led to the Gents toilet. The toilets were checked every fifteen minutes and the manager and attendants regularly had to deal with

* The Imperial/Electric in Portobello Road probably offered the most similar experience to the Tolmer, but the Biograph Victoria outstripped both in terms of the sexual proclivities of its patrons. The admission price was greater and the cinema was in better condition, but it was a notorious gay rendezvous and the constant parade of men up and down the aisles seeking a pick-up was not merely distracting but a confounded nuisance.



Staff photograph. Back row: Dennis, Don, manager Ron Knee, unidentified, and Brian. Front row: Dave, Dan, and Clare. (Courtesy of Ron Knee.)

patrons who became unacceptably vocal due to the influence of drink or mental issues. Occasionally fights had to be broken up, though these were less a characteristic of the cinema itself than merely life in a big city. Ron Knee (manager, 1968/69) was nevertheless sometimes escorted by his staff to the tube station at the end of a night when there had been altercations with certain patrons. Towards the end of its life, the Tolmer's screen had been slashed due to somebody having thrown a bottle at it, and had to be patched up; it was also marked in other places where it had been hit by drinks or ice creams. It was not the first time the screen had been slashed: the same thing occurred a few years earlier and after it was replaced the picture was so bright that it lit up the whole auditorium.

In spite of all this, the Tolmer was fun to work in. Brynmor Jones took a job as a seventeen-year-old third projectionist in 1949. He describes the area as being very seamy with street girls hanging around at night time; and the cinema being "a bit of a dump" even after having been re-opened only five years previously. His weekly wage was £4, compared with £2. 3s. at the ABC Langham Pinner whence he had come. After a few weeks he decided to leave but was offered and accepted another ten shillings to stay. The owners would come every week and visit the box, asking after the projectionists ("very kind indeed"). The chief projectionist would often leave Mr Jones to run the show, then return, tell him to rewind the film and then let him have an early night. The second projectionist, Paddy, was a man of very few words who was constantly reading books on Lenin and Marx.

Managers Ron Knee and Andrew Keeshan (the last both enjoyed their time there (the manager in between, John Reynolds, has not been traced). Ivor Pomson had died and his son David ran the company (he was a barrister and also managing director of Maclean Printing and Packaging in Mile End Road) and is remembered as "a very pleasant man, a gentleman". His brother-in-law, Mr Conway, an accountant, was also involved in the company, as was another relation, possibly a cousin. The managers, some at least, chose the films but the selection was vetted and sometimes tweaked by Mr Pomson.

The cinema was normally staffed by a manager, projectionist (with the aid of Projectomatic), a cashier/salesgirl and two doormen inside who patrolled constantly (latterly, Emmanuel and Paco, two young Spaniards from Seville who had been impoverished in Spain and suffered under Franco). In

Ron Knee's time, Mrs Pomson senior covered his day off and manned the paybox during the afternoon. Mr Keeshan was relieved by a retired manager from the Essoldo Kilburn. A lady named Angela, who lived in the Square, served all these managers as a very reliable cashier/salesgirl. She had also found two other ladies from the Square to act as cleaners after Mr Knee found it necessary to dispense with their predecessors. (Mr Knee succeeded a manager who had been jailed for a ticket fraud, after which the declared takings rose dramatically.) Mr Knee's salary in 1969 was £25 per week plus a generous commission of 7.5% on admissions and sales. The salesgirl, too, could earn more in commission than wages.

Another essential member of staff was the aforementioned Henry Clark who was the handyman and night watchman. He had his work cut out keeping up with the mending of seats and other repairs, plus the constant re-painting of the white markings at the end of each row of seats, one of the many things the licensing authority was very picky about. Mr. Clark also perpetuated the story about the Tolmer Ghost. Local legend had it that the original church had to be deconsecrated after the minister hanged himself over the altar. (Mr Brynmor Jones had been told about the ghost back in 1949.) Mr Clark and at least one other member of staff claimed to have seen a bright light appear at four in the morning behind the screen where the old altar used to be. The light moved up the aisle to the foyer and disappeared. Mr. Clark then used to go to Euston Station for a cup of tea at this time.

□ □ □ □ □

All good things come to an end. Since the Second World War there had been development of various sorts of the area to the north of Euston Road, between the stations and further west. Tolmers Square and some of the neighbouring houses had nevertheless been left virtually unscathed, albeit in poor condition. Beginning in 1959, however, there were three applications from property developers to build office blocks (24 storeys in one case) on the north and south sides of the Square. Although the area had been zoned by St Pancras Council for commerce, some of the applications were initially approved but turned down by the London County Council (LCC) after pressure from the Tolmers Square Tenants Association (TSTA). This had been formed in 1957 to combat the effects of the Rent Act of that year which raised drastically the permissible maximum rents for private tenants. The Association did want new housing, however, as some of the existing houses were appalling, and the LCC declared it was "considering carrying out a comprehensive redevelopment of the area". It was to be another twenty years before this came to fruition.

In the early 1960s the TSTA turned its attention to the residents of the nearby area on the west side of Hampstead Road who were being displaced by the demolition of their properties in favour of the Euston Centre ("Euston Tower") which was being created by a firm called Stock Conversion (of which the name of its principal, Joe Levy, was probably better known) and which was eventually completed at vast profit. Unknown to most of the TSTA, Joe Levy was secretly buying up their own homes in Tolmers Square, through various subsidiaries of Stock Conversion, in order to conduct a similar development.

In 1968 the Pomsons made two planning applications to rebuild the cinema, incorporating also

hotel or office accommodation to make it profitable. Both applications were refused by Camden Council, under whose jurisdiction the area had come, on the grounds that it would prejudice the development of the whole site. Prior to these, Joe Levy offered to buy the cinema but was turned down. In 1972, however, he bought it "for an undisclosed sum". "The chief problem has been keeping the building in good repair - our maintenance costs have always been high. And now it's got to the point where it is no longer economical to run the cinema," said David Pomson. "Because of the age of the building, we were finding repairs were not enough; we had to do major rebuilding."

Time Out magazine was sceptical: "Presumably Camden Council is responsible for the decision. Where is their assurance that a similar capacity repertory cinema will be built into the office block that will no doubt occupy the site?" Camden was probably not responsible, though undoubtedly the licensing authority had been a nuisance. It has been suggested by one of the managers that in fact David Pomson was not especially interested in the cinema and had retained it thus far because of its site value and because of his mother's sentimental attachment to it. And, in the manager's opinion, there was not that much wrong with the building.

The sale and closing date were fixed within about a fortnight and staff were shocked at how suddenly and secretly they had occurred. Wednesday 22 March 1972 was the closing day. A midweek date had been chosen for ease of dealing with the bank account and other aspects of vacating the premises. Word had soon got around and on this warm and sunny spring day there was a steady flow of patrons arriving for the last programme, many of them expressing their shock and sadness at the closure.

The last offering was a double bill of *Die Slowly - You'll Enjoy It More*, a dubbed German adventure story starring Lex Barker and Maria Perschy, and *The Looters*, a dubbed French adventure starring Frederick Stafford and Jean Seberg which had been shown as a main feature just over a year earlier. Both films were made in 1967 and were distributed by one or other of the E. J. Fancey companies. There were three screenings of the main feature and two of the second. There were obviously no trailers for

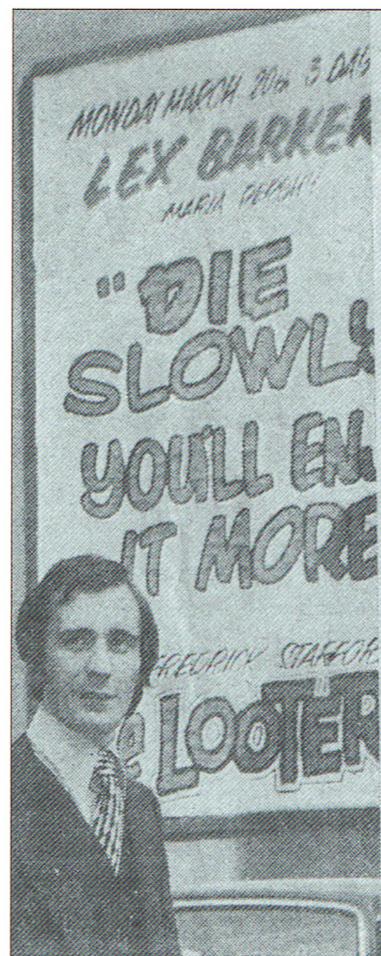
forthcoming attractions, nor advertisements as the contract with Pearl and Dean had ended the previous weekend.* One film followed another throughout the day with no pause or interval. The screen masking automatically moved out for *The Looters* and back in again for *Die Slowly*, not even with a momentary closure of the curtains. In fact, these had been out of use for some time due to the risk of it not being possible to open them. Later in the evening, the bill posters arrived for their final duty, covering up the two billboards with posters reading simply "Cinema Closed". The show finished at about 10pm and the audience filed out for the last time.

A letter from a Mr G. A. Hobbins appeared in the *St Pancras Chronicle* a couple of days later: "Dear Sir, Again a place of enjoyment is to be closed and pulled down, although it has 1000 regular patrons. Is this what we call progress? Who decides about this property? Do the 1000 patrons have a say? Many old-age pensioners will miss it. We were told in 1918 and 1945 this was a land fit for heroes to live in, and take it from me, you need to be a hero to live in it."

Nobody answered him and nobody knows where all the patrons went. Not to the Odeon in Tottenham Court Road: this had closed twelve years earlier. And not, apparently, to the Berkeley or Continentale nor the newly-opened Bloomsbury cinema (now the Renoir), all being too expensive. The King's Cross Cinema did not seem to benefit either, but it was still twice the price. A social amenity, probably equal to or more beneficial than services provided by the State, had disappeared. Neither for the first time nor the last, property speculation had sealed the fate of a successful cinema.

Nick Hart-Williams of The Other Cinema, recently displaced from its berth at the King's Cross Cinema, attempted to lease the Tolmer on a temporary basis, but was unsuccessful. The cinema remained empty and was demolished in June the following year. The projection equipment had been taken out the day after closure and smashed up outside. Demolition began with the smashing of all the seats with a pickaxe.

The situation of Tolmers Square and parts of the neighbouring area became a saga involving the buying up of property, its subsequent neglect, organised opposition and direct action by inhabitants, development proposals (some including a cinema), counter-proposals, deals between developers and the local council etc. - all amidst four changes of national government, restructuring of local government, changes of elected representatives and other personnel, changes in legislation, compulsory purchases and rocketing land values (during the process, Stock Conversion's land, including the cinema site, was purchased by Camden Council, still at a vast profit for Stock



A newspaper picture of the last manager, Andrew Keeshan, outside the cinema in its closing week.

Closing notice. In fact, the cinema closed on 22 March, so the easel sign should read "closed from March 23rd". (Photograph by Allen Eyles.)



* There had only ever been national advertisements as Pearl and Dean had been unable to attract local advertisers due to the cinema being in a poor area.



During demolition in 1973. (Left photographs by Kevin Wheelan, top right from CTA Archive photograph by Marcus Eavis.) Site after demolition. (Photograph by Martin Slavin.) View today. (Photograph by Allen Eyles.)

Conversion). It was too involved to describe here, but became notorious not just in London but nationally.*

At the end of 1982 the new development finally opened. It was inevitably a compromise between housing and office development, but not too bad for all that. An office block looms over the south side of the Square, tall but at least helping to mute the sound from the busy Euston Road. The houses have been replaced by fairly civilised low-rise dwellings and the surroundings are peaceful. There is a pleasant pub in one corner and various other amenities - but no cinema. Where it once stood is now a landscaped

grass mound - perhaps not dissimilar to that which covered the artesian well in the 1830s.

I would like to thank the following for their assistance in researching this article and/or providing photographs: Mark Aston, John Barker, Steve Dutfield, Allen Eyles, Lawrence Geary, Veronica Hitchcock, H. Brynmor Jones, Andrew Keeshan, Ron Knee, the late Sam Lomberg, Gavin McGrath, Arthur Percival, Malcolm Phillips, John Platford, Lydia Pohani, Clive Polden, Ken Roe, Clifford Shaw, Bob Skinner, Martin Slavin, Paul Tribick, Gerry Turvey and Kevin Wheelan. And particular thanks to Nick Wates for allowing me to use material from The Battle For Tolmers Square, especially the appendix "A Little Local History" by Tim Wilson.

* *The Battle For Tolmers Square* by Nick Wates, ISBN 0 7100 8448 X, gives a vivid account.