



Save Hulme Hippodrome Ltd, Jan 2024

EXTENDED REVIEW – Social Histories

Preston's Palaces of Pleasure

John Cotterall, 1988, 36pp

Published by Neil Richardson, Radcliffe,

ISBN 1 85216 022 5

EXTRACTS, pp 8-12:

[subheadings added]

What might a 1980s booklet on the old cinemas of Preston have to tell us about the Hulme Hippodrome and Playhouse?

Quite a bit, actually. Who knew the Playhouse was used for opera in Hulme?

Two of the buildings discussed were built and owned by William Henry (WH) Broadhead, known to our supporters as the owner of the Hipp in Hulme. These two buildings were the King's Palace in Preston (1913-1955) and the Preston Hippodrome (aka Royal Hippodrome, 1905-1959). Fortunately for us, the details of the Preston Hippodrome were 'sneaked into' this booklet even though it was not used as a cinema.

Looking at extracts about the King's Palace first, we can learn details of Broadhead's approach to architecture, interior design and bookings:

“ Built in 1913 on the site of an old skating rink, the King's Palace, with its terra cotta exterior, was at the corner of Bishopsgate, Old Vicarage Lane and Tithebarn Street. Like the Empire, it was in the style of Louis XIV. The decorator was the same as for the London Stoll and there were three domes in the ceiling with the proscenium arch supported by colonnades of rouge-et-noir marble. Capacity was 2,559 (3,000 with standing) and these figures, when the original licence was sought, were claimed to be an embarrassing addition to the town's theatrical / cinema provision.

At the hearing immediately prior to the opening of the new theatre, the owners of the Empire (capacity 3,000), the Theatre Royal (1,500), and the

Princes (2,500) argued jointly that “Preston was notorious in the profession for the fact that not one of the theatres realised a decent return on the capital sunk in them.” Taking one third of the population as a safe average on which to rely for audiences, Preston's theatres could expect 40,000 people per week. But there were already 100,000 places available, even without the new King's Palace and the 12 picture halls which existed. Mr E H Page, owner of the Princes, said that his house had suffered by the increase in picture shows and the erection of the Empire. “If it had not been for the Princes, Blackburn — a little gold-mine,” he said, “I would have been ruined.” He had bought the Princes for £8,000 — probably, he claimed, £5,000 less than it cost to build — and his weekly loss was £20.

In answer to the claim that the Hippodrome should be closed to compensate for the opening of the Kings, W H Broadhead refused to disclose whether or not the Hippodrome made a profit. He argued that theatres and cinemas were often crowded on Mondays and Saturdays and sometimes on Thursdays — and he got his licence! Unlike the Empire, the King's Palace was not specifically equipped for Bioscope [an early form of cinema], nor was there a refreshment bar.

W H Broadhead claimed to be more optimistic about prospects in Preston than his fellow theatre owners. At the inquiry, in answer to the question, “Do you think the propensity of Preston for entertainment is greater than in other towns?” Broadhead replied, “Yes — I think Lancashire people generally do enjoy themselves. They are proverbial in this sense.” He also revealed that he had been interested in buying the Empire when it had first been built and was not averse to purchasing the Empire then, “at a business price”.

Broadhead's King's Palace actually opened on 6th February 1913 and it was described as the most up-to-date theatre in Lancashire, offering **opera from the Grand Junction, Manchester** [later as the Playhouse], and pantomime from the Liverpool Pavilion — both part of the Broadhead Circuit.

Safety exits

“Another Messrs Broadhead and Sons achievement in the raising of magnificent halls for the delectation of the people,” proclaimed the management and they announced to a public nervous about the possibility of a theatre fire that the new theatre had been sited with streets on three sides. The building had no fewer than fourteen emergency exits.

Colours

The prevailing colours inside were crimson and gold with crimson and green. There were paintings on the ceiling and over the proscenium arch with shapes representing “the allied goddesses who personify grace and beauty”. The general effect was said to be “sunny, buoyant and vivacious,” giving the appearance of “elegance and refinement”. In the 1920s, the theatre was called “The King's Palace of Music and Pictures” and, because of its capacity, the Palace was in demand for meetings at election time. Although there were occasional periods of live theatre in partnership with the Hippodrome — notably in 1931 — the King's Palace never really justified the theatrical investment it represented, and as early as 1917 there was a resort to continuous film performances — “Come what time you like — stay as long as you like.” An innovation then, the idea of continuous shows was well developed later a quarter of a century later with double feature programmes.

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[The location is now part of Preston bus station and shopping centre.]

Looking at extracts about the Preston Hippodrome, opening four years after Hulme Hippodrome, we can learn details of Broadhead's changed approach to theatre design, especially the smaller stage design:

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Royal Hippodrome, Preston (1905-1959)

Although the Preston Hippodrome exemplified how the music-hall programme was used as an early opportunity for the showing of films, the Hippodrome as such has really no place in [this publication of] the history of Preston's cinemas. Despite very real temptations, the Hippodrome management determinedly kept to live theatre when all the other Preston theatres had been annexed by the growing empire of the Cinema. Yet precisely because of this, and because the history of the Broadhead theatres is one of the most fascinating “showbiz” stories in the North West, Broadhead's Preston Hippodrome is included here as “*The One That Got Away*”.

The Broadhead Circuit, a family business

The history of the Cinema began in London's Marlborough Hall in February 1896; the history of the Broadhead circuit of theatres started ten years earlier at the Prince of Wales Swimming Bath on the Blackpool promenade — where the Palace used to be and where Lewis's is now. The management had, “at great expense, constructed a new central stage extending the width of the bath in which variety performances are given at each entertainment in

addition to the swimming show and the water pantomime. An uninterrupted three-hour show — the sight of Blackpool.”

“The Management” was William Henry Broadhead, born in 1848 in Mansfield. A farmer's son, he had graduated, via Nottingham, into building. At the age of 15 he had worked in Liverpool and then established himself as a building contractor in Longsight, Manchester, where, in 1871, he married local lass Mary Anne Birch. The business did well with her support and the head office moved to 25 Tib Street in central Manchester — “Broadhead and Sons”.

By his early forties, Broadhead had made enough money to move to Blackpool; his health demanded that he should quit the smoke of Manchester. “Blackpool saved my life,” he said later. It was the enthusiasm of the family — particularly the eldest son, William Birch Broadhead — which helped to get him involved with the Prince of Wales Baths, an establishment which no-one else had the financial courage to touch. Mother and daughters took the money — brought home in buckets to be counted — and “Willie” was the stunt swimmer and comedian. From this show came not only a chain of theatres but also the Blackpool Circus Water Finale.

Becoming a Liberal Alderman and a director of the Tower and South Pier companies, W H Broadhead felt a responsibility to extend his Blackpool activities to provide what he thought to be the right sort of entertainment for working-class folk. “Quick, clean, smart and bright,” was the motto: “A refined up-to-date entertainment. Ladies and families especially invited. Dramatic productions of an uplifting moral nature for the working classes at prices they can afford.” No “vulgar shows” were tolerated and there was no bar (indeed the Preston Hippodrome bar was not opened until 1934). A man of authority, with a heavy black beard, bald head and black eyebrows, Broadhead smoked cigars and toured his theatres in a Daimler, insisting that, every morning in envelopes of standard size, he should receive a return of the previous day's takings. Seventeen envelopes were ceremoniously opened each day with a special paper knife.

The Broadhead Circuit, itemised

The first theatre to be established was the Osborne, Oldham Road, Manchester, opened on 13th April 1896. The Metropole followed, and then came the Longsight Kings (his mother lived in Longsight), the Queen's Park Hippodrome, the Eccles Crown, the Hulme Hippodrome and the Junction. The Hulme Hippodrome was eventually bought by Mecca and the Junction, which adjoined it, was until recently a BBC studio housing the former Blackpool Winter Gardens Wurlitzer.

Others in the group were:

Preston	Royal Hippodrome
	King's Palace (opened in 1913 and the last of the theatres)
Bury	Hippodrome
Salford	Hippodrome
Ashton-under-Lyne	Empire Pavilion (opened 1909)
	Palace
Liverpool	Pavilion (At the time of writing there are rumours that the Pavilion might revert to theatre / cinema after use many years as a bingo hall.)

The Morecambe Winter Gardens was the only existing theatre to be bought by the company.

“W H Broadhead and Sons were builders of theatres rather than bidders for theatres someone else had built,”

said variety performer Percy Honri (W H Broadhead's son-in-law). Only two excursions were made into Cinema: the Empress Electric Theatre and the New Pavilion Electric, both in Ashton-under-Lyne.

[Although the Grand Junction / Playhouse in Hulme was used for a while to show films, and the brick fire-proof projection room is still in place.]

Broadheads resisted following the lead given by the Ardwick Empire — the first large music-hall to move over to films in 1906. Even a £ ¼ million offer, in August 1930, from a major film distributor wanting the chain as an outlet for his product, was not sufficiently tempting.

Bread and butter for artists

The seventeen theatres became known as “The Bread and Butter Tour” — they did not offer a tremendous amount of money but there was the guarantee of employment with low travelling costs for a known time. Ernie Simms became the talent scout and kept a book listing every act with an assessment of it and the cost. Performers treading the boards at the Preston Hippodrome included: Marie Lloyd, Harry Champion, Little Tich, the two George Formbys, Randolph Sutton, Renee Houston, Dave Morris, Gracie Fields, Sandy Powell, Tommy

Handley, Clapham and Dwyer, Billy Bennett, Frank Randle, Henry Hall, The Two Leslies, Carol Levis, Billy Cotton, Shirley Bassey and many more.

First impressions

The Preston Hippodrome was on the site now occupied by C&A's store and it took eight months to build. Accommodation was for two and a half thousand, and on Saturday, 14th January 1905, the building was thrown open to a public who wallowed the new splendour available to Preston. "The magnificence the interior decorations and the comfort of patrons in all parts of the house," enthused the newspaper, "elicited warm approbation and there was a consensus of opinion that the Hippodrome would admirably fill a long-felt want in the town." The New Victoria was not the first theatre to dazzle Preston folk!

The weather on the Monday after the viewing day was atrocious, with blizzards, and salt gangs were at work keeping the tram line points from freezing up. But it was standing room only at the theatre and "when the fire curtain was raised and the magnificent stage disclosed, hearty rounds of cheering resounded through the building." The architecture has since been described as "bastard Italian". The structure was very sound with walls 27 inches [0.7m] thick; extensive use was made steel beams (an advantage if there was a fire) and there was a lot of Italian-style plaster-work, probably undertaken by Italians living locally.

Keeping his non-theatre options open

Although nothing was said at the time, the Broadhead policy was to get as many people into the building as possible and things were planned in such a way that, if entertainment did not prove profitable, there could be a fairly easy transfer to manufacture.

The stage suffered particularly. There were no flies [headroom above the stage to store backdrops etc] and there was a very steep rake [a steeply sloping stage] which, although it was helpful for one-man acts, was very demanding on those wanting to erect a stage set. Repertory companies were later to find this a real problem, as was the lack of any space for the painting of scenery.

But the first-night audience was oblivious to problems to be faced by later generations. The opening programme included performing dogs, trick cyclists, acrobats and coloured [sic] serenaders. Charles Coburn was top-of-the-bill with "*Two Lovely Black Eyes*" and "*The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo*". "This week's programme is typical of the fare usually presented by Mr Broadhead for the amusement of his patrons," the newspaper announced,

“and there is not the slightest doubt that the Hippodrome will immediately establish itself as one of the most popular institutions in the town.”

The Music Hall boom was from the mid-1800s to the outbreak of World War 1 and so the Preston Hippodrome only came in at the end of this era. Over 52 years of its existence it mirrored on its stage tremendous changes in history, fashion and culture. Opening shortly after the end of the Boer War, the Hippodrome soldiered on through two world wars, the economic depression between them, the coming of films, the talkies, radio, the gramophone and television. It saw the advent of the “affluent society” and the rise in popularity of Bingo. As an alternative to Variety there were occasional musical shows and when times were bad, sometimes cheap revues of which W H Broadhead would not have approved.

End of a dynasty

William Henry had died in April 1931. “He came to this town in search of health and to this town he gave of his great gifts of leadership, his sanity of judgment, his skill and directive intelligence,” read his obituary in the Blackpool paper. His eldest son, “Willie”, had taken on long before, but in 1907, while negotiating to add a London theatre to the group, he had died at the age of 34, as a result of a chill caught because of a car breakdown. His younger brother, Percy Baynham Broadhead, took over as managing director and was, effectively, the guide of Hippodrome's fortunes through most of its history.

Early in 1939 there were signs that the Broadhead links with the Preston Hippodrome were coming to an end. Support for the theatre was dwindling and in July 1939 there was a special effort with, in the words of the publicity, “that great money-spinner, *'Love on the Dole'*.” At the end of the performance on 3rd July the Mayor, who had been invited to try to inject a sense of occasion into the proceedings, “complimented the cast on their fine work but deplored the size of the audience”. The play was not the money-spinner it had been elsewhere and the staff of the theatre were themselves soon on the dole.

Second World War

All theatres, like the cinemas, closed at the outbreak of war, and although the King's Palace and other places of entertainment re-opened on 25th September [1939] the Hippodrome remained “dark” until mid-1941.

Claude Talbot, a jovial, genial gentleman who lived in Southport, had taken over.

The Mayor and Mayoress were again present for the re-opening, a Jack Hylton production called “*Secrets of the BBC*” with Bryan Michie, Adelaide Hall and

Godfrey Winn. "It is the intention of the New Management," said Mr. Talbot, "to carry on the old tradition of the best in variety and musical comedy in the same atmosphere of comfort and cheeriness that made the old Hippodrome so popular. Notable improvements in safety, lighting and appearance have been made." Prices were between 1s and 2s 6d. Subsequently Ted Ray, Richard Tauber, Harry Roy, Stainless Stephen and Wee Georgie Wood appeared amongst many others.

The Old Vic presented Shakespeare and the companies of Sadlers Wells, D'Oyly Carte and Carl Rosa also performed. There was even a week in May 1943 with the National Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Julian Clifford; soloists included Eileen Joyce, Louis Kentner and Ida Haendal.

Saved by Repertory 1947-1955

Northern Music Hall was broadcast from the [Preston] Hippodrome on three occasions in 1947 and there was a good run of Variety until mid-1946, when there was a return to the rather indifferent revues which were a feature of the Broadhead demise. Then, in July 1947, the Salberg Players came to the Preston Hippodrome. The original booking was for eight weeks; they stayed eight years! The Hippodrome is remembered affectionately by the many supporters of this long repertory season which lasted until March 1955. Again it was dwindling support which brought about change. "A rather sad fate," said Reginald Salberg after the 365th production, "for a company which has recently been described in the Press as the best weekly repertory in the North West."

The Hippodrome struggled on for another two years until the final curtain came down on Saturday, 25th May 1957, after the biggest audience for many months. The date, said Claude Talbot, was "one that should be remembered with shame by every citizen of this town who claims to enjoy the Theatre. I don't think there will ever be a live theatre in Preston again." Mr Talbot was not quite right — we now have the Charter Theatre. But the Broadhead / Talbot Preston Hippodrome was certainly the last commercially-run theatre in Preston, and it never reverted to full-time Cinema or resorted to bingo, a distinction of which it could be proud.

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[Preston Hippodrome was demolished in August 1959.]

Sources: There are no specific citations of sources though the Acknowledgments on page 2 include: the Harris Library, the Harris Museum, the Lancashire Evening Post, and the North West Film Archives.