

# Remembering half a century of service

Mark Trompeteler spoke with

BKSTS Honorary Member **PETER BAYLEY MBE**

Meet

# The Chief



December 2010 saw the retirement of Peter Bayley after completing a half century's continuous service as a projectionist at the same North London cinema. Just before he retired Mark Trompeteler chatted to him about his incredible professional vitality and longevity and his secret for keeping sane whilst working for fifty years in the same box.



**W**hilst visiting The Phoenix cinema in East Finchley to see the impressive restoration and refurbishment that was being undertaken, I was fortunate enough to meet up with Chief Projectionist Peter Bayley just before his retirement. At a time when the cinema was celebrating its one hundredth birthday, he was about to complete fifty years continuous service as the cinema's projectionist. I was visiting the cinema with Nigel Wolland and after a tour of the building work progress, the three of us popped across the road to the pub. What was evident in my meeting Peter was his love of his working life as a projectionist and particularly his attachment to a simple oblong building that is one of the oldest continuously operated cinemas in the UK. A cinema that oozes atmosphere and these days looks resplendent both inside and out. Peter is a charming and gregarious man who graciously shares his reflections on his long career. I thought that it is not everyday that I have lunch with a couple of MBEs, and as we started our lunch Peter kindly went on to share some reminiscences of his life as a projectionist.

Peter first became really interested in working as a projectionist when he was at school and regularly helped a teacher with film shows. He had already fallen in love with cinema and at the age of sixteen and a half applied for and got a job as trainee projectionist at the North Finchley Odeon. He was soon confirmed in the position of 4<sup>th</sup> Projectionist and given the responsibility of making up the children's matinee. The Odeon also shared a

newsreel with the nearby Gaumont and Peter's job also included carrying the can of newsreel film between cinemas several times a day. He stayed at the Odeon for seven and a half years during which he rose through the ranks to become second projectionist. Two fond memories he has from these very early years are firstly the very first time he was left in charge as the senior projectionist on duty to run the evening show in the days of reel changes. Secondly, when he took the initiative to turn up the sound levels for the musical numbers during the shows of "The Glenn Miller Story", in order to give the audience a heightened "big band" experience.

In 1960 at the age of 23 Peter Bayley joined The Phoenix (The Rex as it was then known) as second projectionist with a chief projectionist in post. Four years later Peter himself became the chief. In the early days there was a lot of pressure on him to run the projection requirements of the cinema virtually single handed – he remembered a period when he worked nine months continuously every single day with one night a week going home early as the only respite. Management became aware of the real need for more than one projectionist however small the cinema was, and fortunately after this period, they started employing other projectionists again. Another early fond memory was one of projecting one of the revivals of "Gone With The Wind" at the then Rex. He seems to remember it had a four mag. track on the

35mm print and he distinctly remembers the glorious and rich colours on the screen and that the sound was very good. It had a good run at the cinema with very good audiences every day. He seemed to remember it was sometime around 1961 – 1963, before he became the chief.

In around 1974 – 1975, during a brief period when the cinema was owned by the Granada Group, he was offered a move to the Granada Harrow but the idea of working in a multi screen cinema never appealed to him and he was very happy to continue to work at the single screen Rex.

He did confess that his biggest career highlight occurred on marrying one of the cinema's manageresses – his wife left the cinema in 1978, by which time it had been renamed The Phoenix by new owners.

Peter has worked with a whole history of equipment. The projection box is not that big and has a ninety five foot throw to the screen. On joining the cinema he worked with a pair of Kershaw Kalee 11s with RCA sound heads, a "high fidelity" 6 valve amplifier and RCA loudspeakers – this equipment dated back to 1938. In 1970 this very long serving equipment was replaced by Gaumont Kalee 21 projectors from the Picture House Felixstowe and lit by Peerless Magnarc carbon arcs from the Florida Tottenham. A newer RCA amplifier replaced the old valve model. Ten years later saw the introduction of Westar 2001E projectors with Westrex sound heads to which the Peerless arcs were fitted and it was during this period when the cinema had a growing "art house" repertoire that a Bell and Howell 16mm projector with long play spools was introduced into the box. In 1986 under the ownership of the cinema by the Phoenix Trust a Kinoton ( Philips ) FP20 projector was installed with a Xenon lamp from the Academy, Oxford Street. Today, as Peter



retired, the most used piece of equipment is a NEC NC 800C digital projector working with a Doremi DCP 2000 digital cinema server. Sound is being delivered by a Dolby CP65 processor with SST amps.

In the millennium year of 2000 Peter celebrated his 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary at The Phoenix and this was celebrated with a special showing of "The Smallest Show on Earth". In 2002 his long service at The Phoenix was recognized with an MBE in the New Years honours list. In 2010 at age 73 he celebrated 33 years of marriage and 50 years of projecting films at The Phoenix, when he was still working three weekday afternoons. He finally decided to retire after the renovations to the cinema had been completed and he reached his half century's service. (He indicated that he and another "young" projectionist, Paul Stanley, in his early sixties, between them have a joint service record of some 80 years service at

The Phoenix. It is a cinema people just do not want to leave! )

Peter shared with me an important personal observation about how he had managed to stay sane working long hours in the very same relatively small projection box for fifty years. He told me that possibly he and a lot of people would have gone a little mad cooped up in the same small confined space for such a long time with a non stop diet of fantasy, fiction, romance, melodrama, action, adventure, tragedy, disaster and comedy echoing around the room and flashing onto the big screen the other side of the porthole. He said the secret to his sanity through this fifty year period was a small window that looked onto the high street below which was on the landing just outside the projection box door. Through this window he was able to observe the high street, the trees, the traffic, the people walking by, and observe the times of day and the seasons change. To him it was an important hourly reminder of the real world outside as opposed to the "reel" world he was constantly projecting. He told me how much he had appreciated that window over the years and how it helped him balance the real and "reel" worlds of his working life. With the current government's attempts to balance the books of our indebted nation and include the raising of the retirement age as part of its many plans, one can see that Peter was way ahead of his time.

Not too many projectionists retire after a working life of 58 years with a full half century at the same cinema. Someone has to set the pace as Peter has done! I am sure projectionists and cinema staff everywhere would wish him very many congratulations and all the very best for a very well earned retirement.

Mark Trompeteler

