

A SHORT HISTORY OF BRANDON AND...

THE BURNING OF THE CINEMA

Mrs Violet Linge is walking down Stores Street after leaving the home of an elderly invalid who she cares for. It is about 5 o'clock in the morning and as she turns into London Road, she is met with the sight of white smoke rising beyond the avenue of lime trees. She cannot be sure, but she thinks it may be Mr Stanley Lingwood's chimney that has caught fire. He lives in Avenue House, a house that was passed down to him from his parents. As she gets nearer, she sees it is not in fact a chimney fire, but instead the wooden cinema Stanley had built at the bottom of his garden. The white smoke has now turned black and she can clearly see flames. She turns and crosses over London Road to alert Hedley Mills, who lives opposite. Hedley is a member of Brandon's Fire Brigade.

The date is Saturday, 9th June, 1934. Twenty minutes after Violet saw the smoke, Brandon's Fire Brigade arrive on the scene, but it is too late for them to have any impact. The projector room is intact because it is made of brick, a safety measure due to the very hot temperatures the gas driven projector operates at. However, within a few minutes, the timbers supporting the rest of the building have burned through, causing the roof to collapse into the fire, thus adding more fuel. Loud bangs and cracks are heard by local residents who have gathered to witness the dying moments of Brandon's first ever purpose-built cinema. Some of the crowd had been inside there just a few days before, to watch 'The Invisible Man', but for now, they will have to go out of town to watch their movies. This will most likely be to Mr Ben Culey's cinema in Thetford, which he acquired just a few years ago. Mr Culey had also recently acquired Stanley's cinema, leading some residents to suggest the fire may not have been wholly accidental.

Stanley held a passion for the cinema. Before the Great War, touring companies visited Brandon to screen 'movies' at the Paget Hall, but Stanley was projecting slide shows more regularly for audiences in town. During that war, as a discharged veteran of the Somme, he proudly opened his new cinema to an excited town. The 'Electric Picture House' opened its doors on Tuesday, 9th July 1918, with proceeds going to the Red Cross. Capable of sitting up to five hundred people, the venue became popular, but a decade later it was in decline. By the time of the fire, it had become a flea pit, with staff often seen spraying insecticide in the auditorium. Stanley was also subjected to his audiences' frustrations. On one occasion, as he stood before them apologising for yet another equipment failure, they threw orange peel at him. In December 1933, Ben Culey took it off Stanley's hands, then fire broke out, and six months after the fire, on Monday 11th February 1935, Ben Culey opened the doors of his new Art Deco, brick-built cinema, named 'Avenue'.