

YALLOURN THEATRE, VICTORIA

by GERRY KENNEDY

The discovery of brown coal in Victoria's Latrobe Valley led to the construction of the town of Yallourn, 130 km east of Melbourne in the Gippsland region. Yallourn was a "company owned" town, built from the 1920s by the State Electricity Commission (SEC) to house workers employed in the open cut coalfields, the power houses and the ancillary service industries. This attractive town was provided with all the amenities found in larger communities, including primary and secondary schools, a hospital and a modern theatre/cinema. The town's residents were always aware that it would be demolished to acquire the coal beneath it: this occurred from the late 1970s and the town was completely gone by the early 1980s. Yallourn had a peak population of about 4,000.

Films had been screened in a variety of locations since the early days of Yallourn, including tents and halls. Travelling film circuits first serviced the town until more permanent arrangements were made, including the use of St John's Church Hall (Anglican). This was a multipurpose hall that was equipped with a permanent bio box and screen. "Talkies" were introduced to St John's on 12 March, 1931, and traded as **St John's Pictures**.

Movies were also screened in St Theresa's Hall (Catholic).

The SEC decided that the community required a modern entertainment centre, and a theatre/cinema was designed and built in the late 1930s on a prominent island position in the town square. The nearby towns of Traralgon and Morwell had purpose built town hall cinemas, the **Yallourn Theatre** was the first dedicated theatre / cinema to be built in the Latrobe Valley.

The theatre itself was an imposing feature in the town, and was designed to complement other commercial and civic buildings in the garden square setting. It was located on a triangle of land surrounded by three streets. Its exterior design, apart from the large stage house, was similar to other major moderne styled theatres in the metropolitan area built in the late 1930s. All exterior walls were constructed in cream Yallourn clay bricks, and the detailed brickwork was a feature of the building. Alternate rows of bricks were slightly projected at the wall corners and this provided the building with a cheap but effective ornamentation. The building was wedge shaped with a softly bowed frontage. The large

bio box and both foyers were largely built in front of the main auditorium. The theatre did not have a marquee. The exterior roof line, above the main auditorium, was of a flattened pyramid style. A large fly tower was constructed above the stage area.

The size of the building was deceptive and suggested a far larger seating capacity than its 725 seats. The auditorium was on two levels, with the upstairs lounge balcony seating 260, and the stalls 465.

On entering the front doors, the booking office was located on the left and the candy counter on the right. A circular ticket box was situated in the middle of the foyer. These facilities were faced in alternating sheets of brass and copper. Terrazzo floors were used throughout the foyer, but were later covered with carpet to deaden noise. Continuous enclosed lighting was used in the downstairs foyer; this was designed to minimise glare for the incoming patrons.

Access to the upstairs foyer was via a single staircase from the left side of the downstairs foyer; glass bricks provided natural light to the





first landing. The upstairs foyer was carpeted and furnished with blue leather divans.

The theatre was fully equipped for live theatre, including fly tower, orchestra pit, dressing rooms (stage right), scenery storage underneath the stage, etc. As is generally the case with multipurpose facilities, compromises were required in space utilisation; the back stage area and stage width suffered as a result. The theatre was extensively used by amateur and professional groups. Symphony concerts and operas were also staged at Yallourn because of its facilities and central location within Gippsland.

The interior of the theatre was fairly stark in the moderne style of the time, and featured a stepped down ceiling and wall decoration. The use of curve designs throughout the building softened its starkness. A feature of the auditorium was the extensive use of plaster circles, with concave faces, around the stage. They were painted cream and extended to the side walls and ceiling. The stalls seating was of a flip-up design and was covered in the same autumn toned, self patterned velvet fabric as the lounge/balcony chairs. The stalls seating was later recovered in blue vinyl. The stage curtains were of a self-patterned, pale gold velvet. The auditorium walls were covered with a patterned plaster to which shellac had been applied to give an autumn toning effect

The theatre was force ventilated halfway along the ceiling. Evaporative cooling was incorporated in this system. Heating was provided through piped hot water foot warmers. Located in every second row in the stalls, each of the four rows of the lounge, but not in the balcony area. The boiler room was situated behind the left hand side of the stage; brown coal briquettes were used to fuel the system.

The auditorium was lit by large opaline glass lighting pods in a stepped down design, side wall cylindrical brackets, and stage lighting. Four tiers of four lights (on each side of the stage) were incorporated in the plaster circles. These were in-filled with glass and were used

for special stage lighting effects and spotlight work. A crying room was included at the back of the stalls, which was entered from the foyer.

The cost of the building was £19,000 (\$38,000). Three lots of projectors were used in the theatre over time, the original set were C&Ws and were replaced in the 1950s when 3D films were screened, and 70 mm units were installed in 1968.

"The Yallourn Live Wire" of 17 May 1939, advertised the opening celebrations for "Gippsland's Premier Theatre" which were to include the film *Sweethearts* (direct from the **Metro Collins Street**, Melbourne) and a programme of shorts. A live performance was



to be given by Mr Eddie Muller, "Australia's leading mello pianist". Radio 3UL (Warragul) was to conduct a live broadcast of the event. The newspaper recorded that within an hour of the opening of reservations, the first two nights were practically booked out.

The **Yallourn Theatre** ran different admission prices for different days: -

Monday- Thursdays Stalls 1/7, Balcony 2/2, lounge 2/6 (25 cents)

Friday and Saturday Stalls 2/-, Balcony 2/6, Lounge 3/- (30 cents)

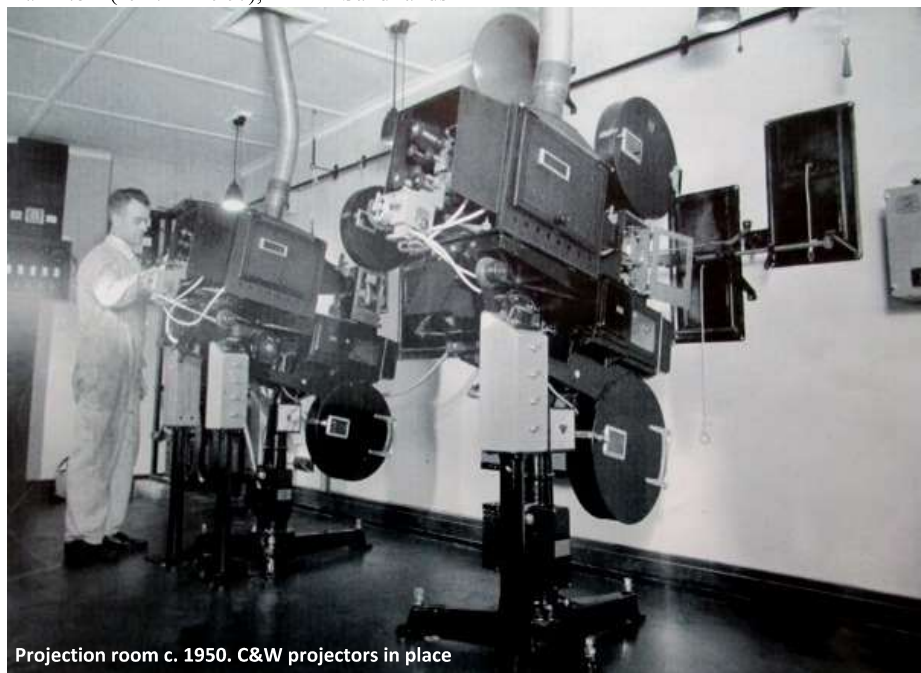
Matinees Children 7d, Adults 1/- (10 cents)

The Yallourn Live Wire, over the ensuing six months, advertised both the **Yallourn Theatre** and **St John's Pictures**, which were operating three to four nights per week. Advertisements for screenings at the **Morwell Town Hall** ceased within weeks of the **Yallourn** opening.

Having to share the building with live performances limited the screening policy. This was a major problem for lessees, especially during its heyday as the district's major cinema. Given that the building had the best stage facilities in the district, it was in heavy demand.

Because of the narrowness of the proscenium, the installation of CinemaScope was less than satisfactory. Patrons sitting to the sides of the front stalls could not view the full screen. Over the years cinemas were built around the Latrobe Valley including **The Valley** in Traralgon, **The Maya** and **Karma** theatres in Morwell, **The Civic** in Moe and the **Monash** in Yallourn North. Drive-In theatres were also built in Morwell, Traralgon and Moe. These proved to be serious competition for the **Yallourn**.

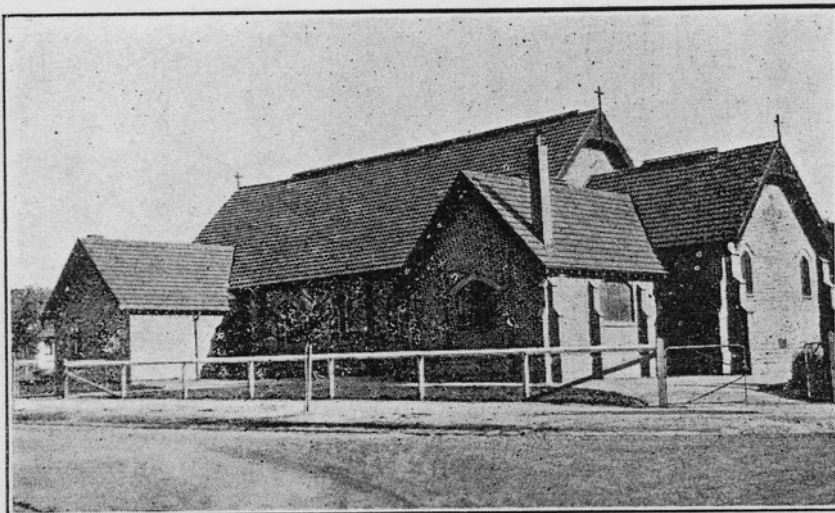
The **Yallourn Theatre** was never managed by the SEC, but was leased to a variety of entrepreneurs throughout its life. The SEC kept a tight control over the lessees as some found out when they tried to sublet the theatre. The lessees were Mr E Very (1939 – 1947), Mr Rex Hamilton (1947 – 1960), Mr A Sandilands



Projection room c. 1950. C&W projectors in place

EVERYONES.

Raycophone Gear for First Australian Church Theatre.



St. John's, Yallourn, notable as the first church to install talkie reproducing gear.

CLAIMED by Harrington's as the first church to be equipped for talkie screenings, St. John's, Yallourn (Vic.) has installed Raycophone reproducing equipment.

Capacity business of 500 was notched on the opening night, with a turnaway totalling around 300, so the folks down Yallourn way are evidently strong for the mixing of sound with sermons.

WHEN the church is converted into a film theatre the pews are reversed and a tapestry is dropped to cover the pulpit, reredos and lectern, thus hiding them from view. A similar curtain is placed at the opposite end and this covers the sound screen when services are being conducted. The projectionist booth is located in a small circular room built into one of the towers, from which a door leads into the vestry. As the tower is on the

side of the building pictures are thrown at a slight angle.

The distinction thus scored has led Harringtons to think of further uses for their portable-type gear in connection with the activities of schools, universities and public institutions. The venture into this field will be marked by a comprehensive campaign and this will be aided strongly by the fact that negotiations are already finalised for the initial college installation in N.S.W.

(1960 – 1966), Mr W Fullarton (1966 – 1968), and Dennis and Hilary Trewin (from 1968 to 1978). The Trewins had the theatre partially refurbished, the first since its construction.

At the time the Trewins took over the lease, hard tops were on the wane due to the competition from television and drive-ins. The **Yallourn Theatre** was now off the first release circuit; at the time this privilege was shared by **The Valley Theatre**, Traralgon, and the

Rex Hamilton will show Warner Brothers' "House of Wax" — Natural Vision color thriller which scored a strong four-weeks season at the Sydney Mayfair in its initial Australian release.

He will be the first Victorian country exhibitor to bring a three-D feature (on any type of screen) to his patrons.

Village Drive-ins at Moe and Traralgon and the **Panoramic Drive In** at Morwell.

In 1968 the Trewins took a large gamble and equipped the theatre for 70 mm presentation; this was to be the only such installation in a country hard-top theatre in Victoria. A top-hinged screen on a demountable aluminium frame was placed in front of the existing stage and proscenium. The stage area could not accommodate the large screen and it was necessary to still allow the theatre to be used for live performances. The screen was hinged to be lifted out of the way for live productions. The move paid off, as **Yallourn** regained its first run status with many distributors, much to the chagrin of the nearby Village circuit drive-in.

Big budget, 70 mm films were screened for extended seasons after which the theatre would revert to screening three nights per week. On some occasions, both the **Yallourn** and **Valley Theatre** (Traralgon) jointly promoted and screened first release films.

In 1974, due to the threatened demise of the Yallourn Township, the Trewins purchased the former **Maya Theatre** in Buckley Street Morwell, which had been converted into a tenpin bowling alley. The Trewins, in partnership with Village Theatres, converted the building into the **Village Twin Cinema**, opening 20 December, 1978.

Among the staff was Nelson Smith, who was the senior projectionist at Yallourn for 22 years, almost up to its closure. Nelson moved across to the new **Morwell Village Twin** until its closure in 1996. Mrs Maxine Dunne nee Burke was a long term usherette serving a similar length of service at the two locations.



The **Yallourn Theatre** closed on 6 December, 1978. The final programme was a repeat season of *Gone with the Wind*. Some projection and other equipment was moved to the new **Morwell Village Twin** site. H

Footnote:

The township of Yallourn was completely demolished, and its former site is now part of the large open cut brown coal mine.

Architects:

William Gower - Architect to the former State Electricity Commission of Victoria (SEC)
H Vivian Taylor and Soilleux. Consulting Architects

Builder: Pomeroy and Lumley, assisted by SEC staff. **Bricklayer:** Keith Denny

Opened: 19 May, 1939 by Mr R A Hunt. General Superintendent of the State Electricity Commission and Mr C H Beanland, President of the Yallourn Civic Association.
Closed: 6 December, 1978.

Acknowledgements:

Building Magazine, August 1939.
Mitchell Library, Sydney (OS690.5 Vol 1. State Electricity Commission Centre, Yallourn.
"Yallourn Live Wire" 17 May, 1939.
"Latrobe Valley Express", 13 Dec. 1978.
Peter Ricketts

Also interviews with Nelson Smith, Maxine Dunne, Dennis Trewin, and Neville Peckwith.

Images:
CATHS Archive

Yallourn Theatre

(GIPPSLAND'S PREMIER THEATRE)

GRAND GALA OPENING PROGRAMME.

FRIDAY MAY 19th, SATURDAY MAY 20th.
MONDAY, MAY 22nd, TUESDAY, MAY 23rd.
SPECIAL CHILDREN'S MATINEE, SATURDAY, MAY 20th,
at 2.45 p.m.

A grand picture to commemorate the opening of a grand theatre.—a theatre equal to any in the State. The Yallourn Theatre presents—

JEANETTE McDONALD and NELSON EDDY, and a big supporting cast, in

"SWEETHEARTS"

(General Exhibition)

(Filmed entirely in glorious Technicolour).

ASSOCIATE PROGRAMME —

A Popular Crime Series — "THE WRONG WAY OUT."
An Our Gang Comedy — "FOOTBALL ROMEO."
A Fitzpatrick Travelogue in Colour — "PARIS ON PARADE."
A Miniature — "TRACING THE SLEEPING DEATH."
A Cartoon in Technicolour — "THE TEARS OF AN ONION."
WORLD WIDE NEWS REVIEW.

SPECIAL ! —

On the Stage in Person (Friday and Saturday only, May 19th and 20th) EDDIE MULLER and HIS MELLO PIANO brings you popular melodies. Australia's Premier Mello Pianist. Winner of P & A Parade, Station 3KZ Melbourne, and recently through all Hoyt's Theatres.

Special at Matinee only — Episode One "ACE DRUMMOND" Aeroplane Serial. Free Sweets. Free Birthday Club Badges and members enrolled for Birthday Club. Matinee Prices — Children 7d, Adults 1/1d.

Bookings open at Theatre, Monday May 15th, at 10 a.m., and remain open until 6 p.m. daily until Saturday May 20th. After this date bookings may be obtained from 2 till 6 p.m. daily at Theatre booking office.

Patrons please note — Theatre Phone Number, Yallourn 250. In fairness to others, telephone bookings cannot be kept after 7.45 on evening of that show.

The opening will be broadcast by 3UL Central Gippsland.

