

NEWSLETTER

VOL.6 ISSUE 1

DATE: NOV-DEC 2024

website: www.strathfieldhomebushhistory.org

‘Homebush Vogue Theatre’

By Cathy Jones



Image 1 Homebush Cinema as the Niterider Theatre Restaurant c.1988 (Cinema and Theatre Historical Society of Australia Inc)

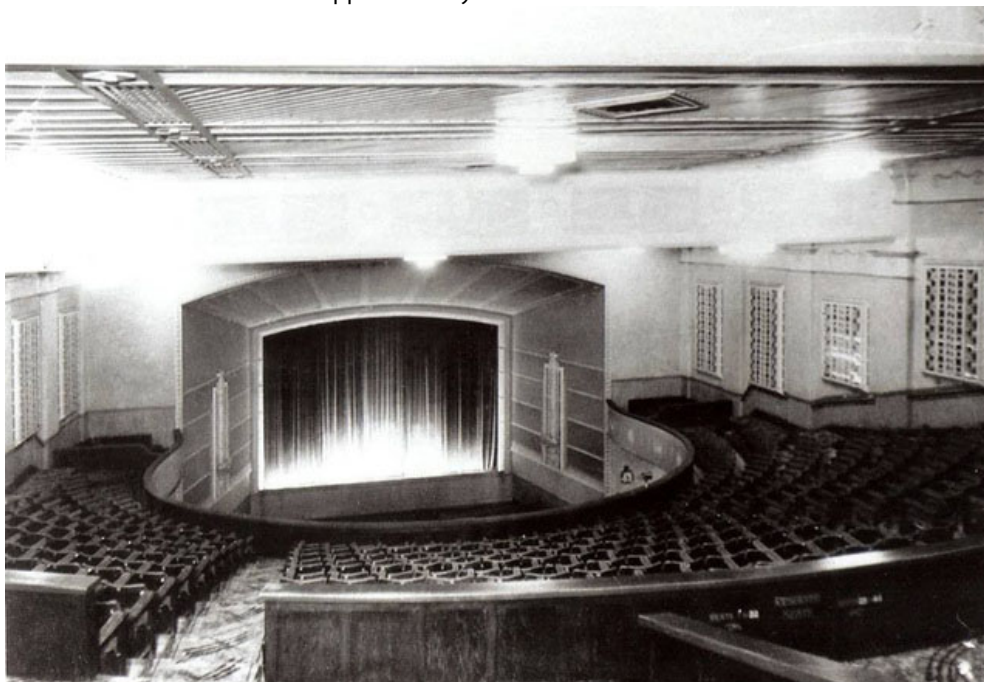
In the early to mid-20th century, local cinemas were a central part of community life in Sydney's suburbs. The first suburban cinemas appeared in the 1910s, often as open-air venues or small theatres. These 'picture palaces' quickly became popular, offering a relatively affordable entertainment option for the growing suburban populations.

During the 1920s and 1930s, larger and increasingly more elaborate theatres were built, often designed with opulent interiors. Suburban cinemas became important community and entertainment destinations. Cinemas were not limited to showing films, they often provided venue spaces for large gatherings, events and live performances. Going to the movies was a much more formal occasion than today, especially for evening performances, with men and women attending and smartly dressed in suits and dresses respectively. An evening performance usually consisted of a short film, musical performance by an organist or orchestra and then the showing of the main feature film. Most cinemas served confectionary and ice cream. The Homebush Cinema had a milk bar next door to the Theatre entry on Parramatta Road.

The Homebush Cinema was built in 1925, during a period of significant cinema expansion in Sydney and regional areas. Most cinemas were located near transport such as rail stations or tram stops. From the 1920s, attending movies was the country's main form of entertainment and one in three Australians attended at least one film a week. Suburban and independent cinemas thrived. By 1933, there were said to be 22 cinemas in Sydney City and 155 in Sydney's suburbsⁱ



Homebush Theatre: The well-appointed foyer



The auditorium and proscenium 1920s

However, building a cinema at Homebush may have been a risky proposal. Homebush was a sparsely populated area in the early 1920s, though as the location of many factories such as Arnotts Biscuits and EMI/HMV records, there was a growing worker population. The Cinema itself was built on Parramatta Road, north of but within walking distance of the Homebush Rail Station. It was located in the small Homebush Municipality, which had resident population of only 1,622ⁱⁱ. It was clear that the Cinema needed to attract patronage from a wider catchment to ensure its viability. This may have been partly assisted by the neighbouring and more populated Strathfield Municipality adopting a residential

proclamation in 1920 prohibiting the building of amusements such as cinemas in the residential areas of Strathfield. Until the merger with Homebush Council in 1947, the Strathfield Municipality never contained a cinema. The Melba Cinema, also known as Strathfield Theatre, was located in the Burwood Municipality.

Another interesting feature of the Homebush Cinema is the high visibility of its facade especially when viewed from the south. The rail line at Homebush was the boundary between Homebush and Strathfield Councils. Though located on Parramatta Road, its prominent facade faces south towards Knight Street (formerly Rochester Street) and the other section of Rochester Street, south of the railway line. In its early history, Rochester Street once crossed over the railway tracks and ended at Parramatta Road. The Homebush Cinema is a landmark structure in the Homebush area and along Parramatta Road.

The development of the shopping area and theatre at Homebush was driven by John Henry Cross (c.1886-1943), a prominent local identity. Cross was registered as the leasee of the historic Horse and Jockey Hotel at Homebush, which is located opposite the Homebush Theatre, in 1917 and 1925 to 1939. Cross was not the owner of the hotel, during these periods it was owned by Tooheys Limited. Cross was prominent in local politics, serving as an Alderman on Homebush Council from 1924 to 1934.

Cross was the prime instigator of developing a shopping area on Parramatta Road Homebush and the Homebush Cinemaⁱⁱⁱ. From around 1919, Cross commenced purchased sites along Parramatta Road with the intention of developing a shopping precinct on both of the north and south sides of Parramatta Road. This centre is locally known as Homebush North shops to delineate from the shops located south of the railway also in the suburb of Homebush. The addition of a cinema, he considered, would put Homebush on the map as well as support the shopping centre. Concurrently with his service on Homebush Council, he was elected as an Alderman to Manly Council in January 1932 and elected Mayor in December 1932^{iv}. He resigned from Homebush Council in 1934 though he continued to own most of the shopping precinct at Homebush North until his death in 1943^v.

In 1924, a new company Homebush Cinema Ltd was formed to acquire land on Parramatta Road and build a theatre and 'carry out business as theatre proprietors'. The company was capitalised at £17,000^{vi}. The company directors included E. L Betts, D. Rogers, A C Crawley, J Irvin and John Henry Cross^{vii}.

The building of the Homebush Cinema was financed by Homebush Cinema Ltd, who lodged an application to building the cinema on August 5 1924 for the estimated amount of £14,300 on Parramatta Road^{viii}. The builders were the Hutcherson Bros. The cinema was designed by architect Charles Bohringer. Bohringer designed a number of important cinemas including the Capitol Theatres at Tamworth (1927), Armidale (1937) and Wagga Wagga 1937). He also designed the Old State Theatre, 150-162 Flinders St, Melbourne. Bohringer was also an investor in the Homebush Theatre and later a resident of Strathfield.

The Homebush Cinema was opened on Thursday 2 April 1925 by Alderman Edward Austin, Mayor of Homebush Municipal Council, in the presence of an almost capacity audience^{ix}. *Everyones*, an Australian cinema trade magazine, reported on 8 April 1925 that:

'This theatre marks an epoch in the history of outer suburban showcases and reflects the greatest credit upon all concerned. The district is somewhat scattered one, and from a casual glance at its potentialities it would seem that it could not possibly support a house with a seating capacity of over 2000 but the chairman of directors Mr J. H. Cross made it clear that the erection of such a building was evidence of their faith in the progress of the district. Suddenly, if the crowds that attended the initial performance may be taken as any indication, the theatre will not be too big even at the present time.'

'The interior decoration is carried out in pastel shades of buff, brown and white, relieved here and there with a touch of blue. The effect is tasteful and restful. The seating is quite on the luxurious side, every seat giving an absolute uninterrupted view of the screen. The stage is deep and well lighted, with a full set of foot lights and borders, making it quite possible to stage a very elaborate prologue.'

'The circle is built on the cantilever system, with a wide sweep and a sharp rake up to the top of the building. Even at the extreme angles the projection is sharp and defined'. The projection room is situated at the back of the circle, and is complete in every detail. Simplex Twins are installed. The projection room is wonderfully clear and distinct, with a soft effect which does not dazzle the eyes.'

'Mr. Cross gave a happy little speech welcome the audience and trusted they would all become patrons. He said no expense would be spared to secure under the best films, and that their watchword would be that nothing was too good for Homebush'

The pictures screened on the theatre's opening night were 'Half a Dollar Bill' and 'Feet of Clay'. 'Half a Dollar Bill' was a 1924 American silent film starring Anna Q Nilsson, a major star of the silent period and William Carlton, an opera singer. It was directed by Woody Van Dyke, later known for the 1930s Thin Man films. 'Feet of Clay', an American silent film, directed by Cecil B DeMille.



The Jazz Singer (1927) starring Al Jolson was largely a silent film, albeit with a couple of musical sequences and snatches of improvised dialogue. However, it opened the possibility of films where the actors could talk. Within a short period, Hollywood the supplier of most films in Australia, transitioned to the new form of talking films.

Talking films were first shown at Homebush in April 1930. In 1930, a number of cinemas located in the Sydney's west were merged including the Homebush Cinema and came under the management of Western Suburbs Cinema Ltd, operated by Mr A J Bezant. Bezant established a string of cinemas in the western suburbs of Sydney in the 1920s and 1930s^{xi}. Homebush Cinema Ltd was liquidated in 1931. Ownership of the Theatre transferred on 2 October 1931 to Western Suburbs Cinema Limited^{xii}.

Regrettably, there are few surviving local newspapers in the period the Homebush Cinema was open and no known surviving records of the cinema operations, however, there are some newspaper mentions of the Cinema which provide some insight into the other social and recreational uses of the Cinema.

On 22 December 1925, in the presence of upwards of 2000 parents and children, prizes were presented by Alderman Boden President of the Homebush Parents and Citizens Association to successful pupils of boys and girls departments of Homebush Public School. The ceremony took place at the Homebush Theatre^{xiii}.

Meetings were held by the 'All for Australia' league at venues in Sydney including the Homebush Cinema in March 1931. The League was formed in 1931 during the Great Depression made up mainly of businessmen, who were critical of the Labor Party and Nationalist Party. It dissolved in 1932 and was integrated into the United Australia Party.^{xiv}



On 18 December 1934, a matinee and evening live performance of Les Shipp's pantomime 'Cinderella' was performed at the Homebush Cinema, promising 'gorgeous settings, wonderful gowns, beautiful girls'^{xv} The performance was headed by 'that ever popular comedian and worlds greatest laugh maker, Joe Lawman' and 'supported by a brilliant company'.

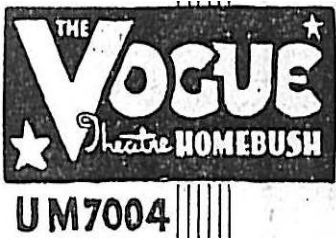


The Homebush Cinema was the site of many meetings and events especially connected to returned soldiers organisations. On New Years Eve 1930, returned soldiers held a party and fund raiser for 'old comrades in distress'.^{xvi} In July 1931, the Flemington sub-branch of the Returned Sailors and Soldiers League (RSSIL) held a a diggers benefit at the Homebush Cinema, featuring a full orchestra of 16 performing under the conductorship of Mr. E. Crocker and a movie program for the second session. During the evening an address on the AIF and war reminiscences was given by Mr William Morris Hughes MHR. Hughes was the Australian Prime Minister during World War I and often attended meetings of returned soldiers. He was also a one-time resident of Homebush.^{xvii}

In 1937, the Homebush Cinema was upgraded and equipped with Western Electric Mirrophone Sound. It reopened with the new sound equipment on 11 Sept 1937 with 'Camille' starring Greta Garbo and Robert Taylor^{xviii} and 'Charlie Chan at the Olympics'.

In 1939, the Cinema closed for extensive renovations under architect L J Buckland. This included new plasterwork for auditorium windows, vestibule and dress circle foyer. Painting was supervised by Arnold Zimmerman who did similar work on numerous theatres. The numbers of seats were reduced to 1645 by the remodelling and introduction of larger chairs. The cinema reopened as the 'Vogue' on 19 August 1939.

In March 1944 Hoyts Theatres acquired the majority shareholding in Western Suburbs Cinemas Ltd, a chain of 24 theatres in the circuit.^{xix} The Homebush Theatre became known as the 'Hoyts Vogue' or 'Hoyts Homebush Vogue'. Hoyts Theatres was founded in 1909 by Dr Arthur Russell in Melbourne. In 1926, Hoyts and two other companies, Electric Theatres Pty. Ltd. and Associated Theatres Pty. Ltd., merged to become Hoyts Theatres Limited. Hoyts is one of Australia's largest cinema exhibitors and as at 2024, operates over 60 cinemas nationally.



The Cinemascope process was developed by 20th Century Fox in the early 1950s and enabled the shooting of widescreen films, which could be shown using standard projection equipment albeit with an upgraded lens. It was one of the new technologies including 3-D used by Hollywood to entice audiences to theatres away from watching television at home. Among the first films to use the Cinemascope process were 'The Robe' (1953) and 'How to Marry a Millionaire' (1953). Cinemascope opened at the Hoyts Homebush Vogue on 9 October 1954.

By the late 1950s, the rise of television led to a decline in cinema attendance. Many suburban theatres were forced to close, while others converted into different uses or were demolished.

The Homebush Vogue closed on Saturday 19 December 1959 with the last screening of 'Count Your Blessings' and 'Here come the Jets'. Count Your Blessings is a 1959 American romantic comedy drama film released by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. It was directed by Jean Negulesco, based on the 1951 novel The Blessing by Nancy Mitford. The film starred Deborah Kerr, Rossano Brazzi and Maurice Chevalier.

In January 1960 the theatre was sold to Eugene and Elizabeth Taus, and Lawrence and Suzanne Conway, as joint tenants for £20,000^{xx}. The sale was to include "300 theatre seats, carpets, light fittings, standby plant, loudspeaker system and suites counter and fixtures and that the sale was subject to the purchases obtaining permission to use the property as an iceskating rink within three months". Ownership was transferred by both parties in July 1961 to Homebush Ice Rink Ltd.

The theatre was then converted into the Homebush Ice Rink which operated until 1971. For a time during the 1960's, the dress circle foyer was used as the 'Cavern Sound Lounge'. In 1971 the facade of the old theatre was painted in alternative vertical red and yellow stripes and reopened under the new name of Strathfield Ice Rink. The rink eventually closed in 1980. In 1982 the old theatre was offered for sale as vacant possession. In 1986 it was extensively converted into the Niterider Theatre Restaurant and was later known as the Midnight Star Reception centre. Parts of the building were adapted for us as a banquet and dance hall. It has been closed since 1996 as a reception centre. The former cinema is heritage listed on Strathfield Council's Local Environment Plan. This building has been known by the following names in it's history: Homebush Cinema, Homebush Theatre, Homebush Vogue, Hoyts Vogue, Homebush Ice Rink, Strathfield Ice Rink, Niterider Theatre Restaurant and Midnight Star.

References

Advertisement 'Cinderella' (1934, December 13), the Screen Tattler, official organ of Western Suburbs Cinema, Supplement to The Aeroplane.

10 Theatres (1930, February 13). *The Sun*, p. 13 (FINAL EXTRA). Retrieved May 31, 2021, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article226022947>



'Company News' (1924, May 6), Sydney Morning Herald

Cork, K (1986), Cinemas of Auburn, Concord and Strathfield Municipalities

Daily Telegraph (1924 May 6), Registrations Homebush Cinema Ltd, p9

'Diggers benefit at Homebush' (1931, July 27), The Labor Daily, p7

Fox & Associates (1986), Strathfield Heritage Study

Homebush Cinema Limited. (1931, October 23). *Government Gazette of the State of New South Wales (Sydney, NSW : 1901 - 2001)*, p. 3678. Retrieved May 31, 2021, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article220365006>

Homebush 'Diggers' (1930, December 30). *The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954)*, p. 8. Retrieved May 31, 2021, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article16742480>

Homebush Man who shifted a suburb (1927, April 16). *Smith's Weekly (Sydney, NSW : 1919 - 1950)*, p. 9. Retrieved June 8, 2021, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article234447689>

HOMEBUSH P. SCHOOL (1925, December 22). *The Labor Daily (Sydney, NSW : 1924 - 1938)*, p. 5. Retrieved October 7, 2024, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article239866167>

Hoyts Theatres Ltd (1944, March 24). *The Argus (Melbourne, Vic. : 1848 - 1957)*, p. 8. Retrieved October 7, 2024, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article11817829>

Jones, C 'Homebush Theatre', Strathfield Heritage, www.strathfieldheritage.org

Jones, C (2020). Horse and Jockey Hotel, Strathfield Heritage, viewed at <https://strathfieldheritage.com/recreation-and-shops/horse-jockey-hotel/>

Maddox, Gary (2013), Screen Gems, Sydney Morning Herald, viewed at <https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/screen-gems-20130218-2emm6.html>

Sands Sydney Directory for Homebush

Spearitt, P. (2000), 'Sydney's Century', University of New South Wales Press

Terrors of Peace (1931, July 28), the Daily Telegraph, p7.

Tonight's AFA Meetings (1934, 24 March), Daily Telegraph, page 8

ⁱ Maddox, Gary (2013), SMH

ⁱⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics (1921), Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, Part X – NSW population of local government areas

ⁱⁱⁱ Smiths Weekly (1927), p9

^{iv} Mr J H Cross Dead, Sydney Morning Herald, 20 July 1943.

^v Mr J H Cross Dead, Sydney Morning Herald, 20 July 1943.

^{viii} Daily Telegraph, Registrations Homebush Cinema Ltd, 6 May 1924, p9

-
- vii Daily Telegraph, 1924
- viii Homebush Council Building Register p42
- ix Cork, K (1986), A History of the cinemas of Auburn, Concord and Strathfield Municipalities', p24-25
- x Cork, K (1986), Cinemas of Auburn, Concord and Strathfield Municipalities
- xi 10 Theatres (1930, February 13). *The Sun*, p. 13
- xii Certificate of land title v.3953 f.42
- xiii Homebush P. School (1925, December 22). *The Labor Daily* (Sydney, NSW : 1924 - 1938), p. 5. Retrieved October 7, 2024, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article239866167>
- xiv Tonight's AFA Meetings (1934, 24 March), *Daily Telegraph*, page 8
- xv The Screen Tattler, Supplement to The Aeroplane, Thursday December 13, 1934.
- xvi Homebush Diggers, (1930, December 30), *SMH*
- xvii Terrors of Peace (1931, July 28), the *Daily Telegraph*, p7.
- xviii Cork, K (1986), Cinemas of Auburn, Concord and Strathfield Municipalities
- xix Hoyts Theatres Ltd (1944, March 24). *The Argus*
- xx Certificate of Title v.7956 f.201 & 202

Vale Lois Michel (1931-2024)

Lois Michel, the long-term Secretary of the City of Canada Bay Heritage Society passed away on 1 December 2024 aged 93 years. Lois dedicated 55 years to the City of Canada Bay Heritage Society being a foundation member and Secretary of the Concord Historical Society that later joined with the Drummoyne and District Historical Society to form the City of Canada Bay Heritage Society.

Lois worked tirelessly for the Society, managing the Museum and working closely with the Yaralla Advisory Committee to preserve the Yaralla Estate. The Society and Museum would not be what it is today without Lois's passion for heritage and our local community. Lois made a substantial contribution to local history studies of the Concord and Drummoyne districts as well as the broader regional area. We extend our condolences to her family and friends. She will be sadly missed.

History of Strathfield talk: 23 February 2025

A talk on the history of Strathfield will be held on Sunday 23rd February 2025 at the Ironbark Room at Strathfield Library. This is a free event presented by the Strathfield-Homebush District Historical Society with support of Strathfield Council. Everyone is welcome.

The afternoon will commence at 2.30pm with a yummy afternoon tea. Talk will finish around 4pm to 4.30pm and include a question session at the end. If you have a question for the talk or Q&A, please submit it before the talk. Email: strathfieldhistory@gmail.com

The talk will discuss many aspects of Strathfield's development. The speaker is Cathy Jones, Secretary Strathfield-Homebush District Historical Society. If you have any questions, email: strathfieldhistory@gmail.com

Bookings are online at <https://events.humanitix.com/history-of-strathfield-talk>. If you have a problem booking, please send an email to strathfieldhistory@gmail.com