

# A weekly morning of madness – and the odd film, too

LES WALTON revisits the "flea pit" of his youth

**W**ITHOUT doubt one of the most significant changes in schools over the last quarter of a century is the increasing access to 'multi-media'.

During my own primary years in the 1940s and 1950s, with the exception of 'practical' subjects, the classroom only contained a blackboard. The only tool a teacher had was a box of chalk. Our only access to the outside world was books.

Even in the 1960s as a young teacher all we had was a Bell and Howell projector and an epidiascope (a machine which projected pages from books on to a screen).

Every week throughout the 60s and 70s I would book films from the Durham County Film Library. Even then some of the older teachers considered that showing films was a diversion from the real job of 'chalk and talk'. To the older teacher, films were commensurate with entertainment.

In the 1950s children would mainly get their view of the outside world from the local pictures, usually on a Saturday morning.

Cinemas were always called 'picture houses' or 'the pictures' in the 1950s. Our village picture house was affectionately known as 'the flea pit'. More than the Co-op and chapel, the picture house was the heart of our village.

There were three shows every week, plus Saturday morning 'children's cinema'. The adventure serial was the highlight of the morning. There were classics which still occur in the cinema. Zorro, Superman, Buck Rogers, Batman and Flash Gordon. Captain Video and his Video Rangers seem to have gone out of fashion.

Every week I would feel quite niggled when the hero, who the week before had actually fallen off the cliff, was nowhere near the edge during that week's episode.

Children's matinees had been shown in British cinemas since the 1920s. After the Second World War, educationalists raised objections to the nature of the films being screened, leading to the Wheare Report into juvenile cinema-going in 1950.

One result was the creation of the X certificate, replacing the H certificate. In 1954 it meant 'suitable for those aged 16 and over'.

To me and my Saturday morning cinema gang it was incredibly frustrating to know that Killers from Space and Menace from Outer Space were rated X certificate. Today these films would be considered as only



» Zorro – here seen in a 1960 film version starring Guy Williams – was a Saturday morning classic to be seen through a veil of peanut "snow" lobbed into the projector beam by naughty twins in the rear rows

requiring a Parental Guidance (PG) certificate.

X certificates were given for many reasons. For example *The Battleship Potemkin* was rejected for 'inflammatory subtitles' and 'Bolshevik propaganda' in 1926 and rated X in 1954 and finally PG in 1987.

In 1954 Saturday morning at the 'flea pit' was just plain madness. The contrast with the cane-imposed behaviour in school was dramatic. Every week Jake Wilson with his twin brother would flick peanuts into the projection beam and shout "it's snowing".

Billy Sterling was once thrown out for peeing on the floor in the back seats and attempting to float a lollipop stick to the front row.

My father, mother, sister and I would go to the cinema every Friday night. We would shuffle along the upstairs front row, waiting patiently as 'Auld George' would unscrew his wooden leg so we could get to our seats.

Everyone would have their own favourite seats. Fred, a local shopkeeper, always sat in the back row downstairs. One night as my father was finding our seats he accidentally knocked George's wooden leg which fell off the balcony and hit Fred on the head. That wouldn't have been so bad, but Fred fell off his seat, and his watch strap caught in the bra of a local beauty.

The house lights then came on, accompanied by the usual stamping and shouting. Without doubt if the

incident had been made into a film it would have been X-rated.

However, the Saturday cinema was more than a window on the world. It was a window on our village.

Many years later, as a student, I took my friends back to the village where my family came from. My Uncle George and his friends were playing in the local dance band in the Town Hall. Just before 9pm, as I was wandering across the floor to ask a girl to dance I heard my uncle announce over the microphone that the band were having a break.

Everyone in the hall including my new 'sophisticated' student friends then started placing the chairs in rows facing the front. We then sat down to watch Popeye cartoons. Some of the more traditional locals thought that Saturday should be 'strictly dancing' and that the cartoons exemplified the destruction of tradition and lowering of standards.

Even today, when a visitor enters a classroom and the children are watching films on the electronic 'white board', there is a little voice inside which says this is not 'proper' learning.

As parents and grandparents when we see our children playing with a computer we may think, wrongly, 'this is not proper learning'.

Perhaps we should remind ourselves of the days of 'blackboards chalk and talk' and embrace the present.

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