

THE YORK RIALTO, FISHERGATE



The Rialto shortly before demolition in 2003. The MECCA bingo hall had just been built on the corner of Blue Bridge Lane, ready to take over from the former cinema

The York Rialto actually began life inside a tent behind Fishergate School in 1908, as the City Roller Skating Pavilion. Sydney Bacon secured the site on Mollett's Field. The rink was made of corrugated iron with a stone frontage and a floor of rock maple. It claimed to be the largest tent ever erected and even had electricity.



In 1909 work was begun on the City Roller Skating Palace (pictured above c.1911) to replace the tented rink. This was built opposite Fishergate School, between the York Glassworks and Blue Bridge Lane, and was formally opened in May by the Lord Mayor, James Birch. The large skating area comprised 25,000 square feet. It could accommodate 1000 participants and 300 spectators.

Speed competitions were held, as well as various performances, and skating became the main craze in the city. In August 1910 a series of alfresco variety concerts were offered with songs rendered by Mr P Howley, Mr Jack Kenyon and Miss Dalton. But despite all this, the rink was not making enough money to keep going. Fortunately the company who owned it were able to sell and the skating rink was reopened in 1911.



Roller Skating Palace Hockey Team in 1908

In 1912 there were matches of five-a-side roller rink hockey. It was still not successful enough, so the building was divided into two and the front section became a cinema, the City Picture Palace. This was called a 'luxury' cinema with tip up seats for 1,000 patrons, at a cost of £2,000.



Roller Skating Rink promotional postcards of 1910

The new Rialto cinema opened in August 1913 and one of its first showings was a silent film showing the Military Sunday parade which took place each year in York. There were also classics of the time like 'The Terrible Turk' and 'Bronco Billy's Girl'. The cinema proved enormously popular. But, during the First World War, the cinema was closed as the building was used for military billets.



The Rialto Cinema in 1929

In 1925 a dancing licence was granted. The company moved into a new era with the arrival of proprietors, J E Winder and J X (John Xavier) Prendergast, known as Jack, who converted the skating rink into a ballroom.

In January 1927 they hosted a Fun Carnival Dance with a free packet of Sarony cigarettes for all dancers! In September 1928 the Rialto Cinema and Ballroom hosted Charleston competitions and was billed as the home of the famous Rialto Revels Dance Band, the 'eight rhythm kings'. There was dancing on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday nights on 'York's biggest dance floor with its velvet like surface'. The Rialto Orchestra also played between films.



The Rialto Ballroom in 1929

The York Rialto was the first cinema to show talkies, on 8th July 1929, with 'Ramsay MacDonald introducing the Cabinet' which lasted 15 minutes. It was the first film to have synchronised sound. Admission ranged from five pence to one shilling. There was a veranda around the top of the building where patrons could sit and drink coffee and watch the dancing on the wooden sprung floor.

By the beginning of the 1930s the official name was the Rialto Cinema, Ballroom and Café.

The venue was an important focus for the local community, as seen in this photo of Jack Prendergast standing behind the May Queen (perhaps) with her attendants in the early 1930s.





Queuing at the Rialto in 1931

The house band had a new name on 5th October 1932, becoming Wynn Derr and the Rialtonians (a play on the name of band member Oliver Winder whose father was the partner of Jack Prendergast).

The Rialto was refurbished and the New Rialto Ballroom opened on 8th September 1933 and featured the famous London bandleader Lew Stone and his Complete Monseigneur Band. Nat Gonella and Al Bowly were also on the bill.



The Rialtonians in 1934, with Jack Prendergast on the left



Ladies cycle race in the Rialto ballroom in the early 1930s



Possibly a military band from Fulford Barracks playing in 1930. The stage decoration reflects the design motifs of the period, with beautiful dancing figures in the centre.

But then tragedy struck when the building burnt down on 6th April 1935. The final film before this was 'The Crime Doctor'. The damage was estimated at £30,000. Fire engines rushed to the scene at 5.30 in the morning, the trailer pump was taken down to the river and firemen fought for two hours to put out the blaze. But they were unable to save either the building or the instruments of the band.

(see this Yorkshire Film Archive film of the fire at 3.27 minutes into the recording: <https://www.yfanefa.com/record/10980>)

Amazingly, the newly rebuilt Rialto opened within months, on 25th November 1935 with the film 'Gold Diggers of 1935'. The architect was Frederick Dyer, who also designed the Clifton cinema for Jack Prendergast. It remains owned by the family. The new cinema had a painted mural depicting the history of York, which encircled the entire foyer. It could seat 1800. A new feature was that of coloured lights in the auditorium, the first such scheme in the country.



Architect's drawing of the new Rialto

During the 1930s Jack Prendergast became very well-known and respected internationally, and through his contacts he was able to offer some world-famous artists who did not usually play provincial towns, such as Stan Kenton and his Orchestra, Louis Armstrong, Jack Buchanan, the Halle Orchestra and Gracie Fields. One big event was in 1934, when the 'world's greatest saxophonist' Coleman

Hawkins appeared, with dancing from 9pm to 2am that night. During the 1930s and 1940s the Rialto began to host Melody Maker dance band championships which the Rialtonians won a few times. In August 1934 they went to London to make some recordings for Octocross Records, being billed as J Prendergast and the Rialtonians.



The Rialtonians in the new ball room in 1935

They were the only York dance band to ever record commercially. The venue branched out into holding café concerts and Saturday afternoon tea dances. Next door to the cinema was the Rialto Sweet Shop run by Mrs Prendergast.

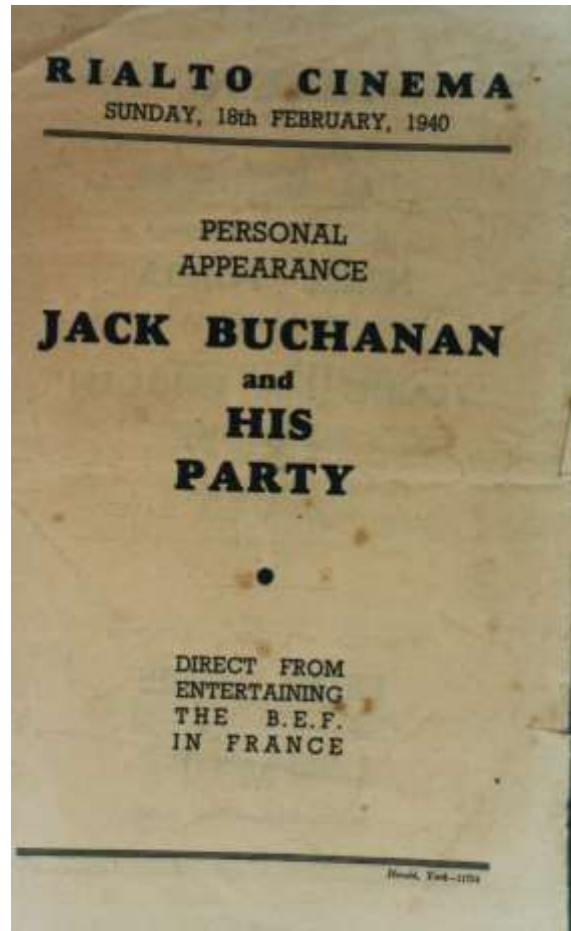


Louis Armstrong at the Rialto in 1932, with Jack Prendergast on the left

All cinemas were closed for a week at the beginning of the Second World War, but the Rialto opened again on 6th September 1939 showing Ronald Colman in 'The Masquerader'. There were air raid shelters only fifty yards away and there was an anti-air-raid gun on the roof. Edward Farley was the resident organist. The organ was an elaborate 'Mighty Compton' which was raised during the intermission to be lowered again in time for the film. It looked very elaborate with its array of coloured lights and art deco patterns. There was no longer any need for pianists or orchestras to accompany a film.

During the war years, Farley played at special concerts on Sunday nights

specifically for the forces who only paid sixpence, whereas members of the public paid a shilling. During his five years at the Rialto, he played 1250 interludes and was one of the first cinema organists to have a microphone installed, to lead the audience



in singing. People felt they got value for money when they visited the cinema, with a newsreel, two films and a singalong included.

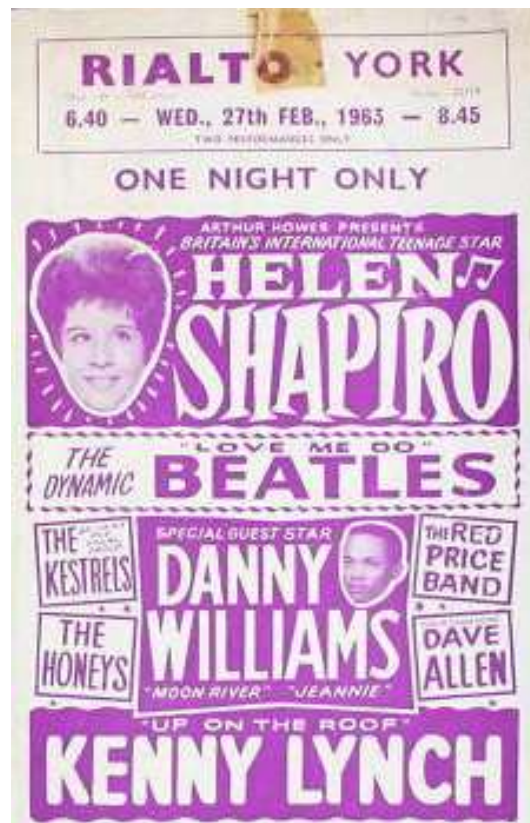
After the war, different musicians came along and the New Rialtonians were formed. The Prendergasts were a prominent Catholic family in the city and they held a big concert each St Patrick's Day when children from local Catholic schools performed.

By the 1950s a lot of young British singers were making their names and many appeared at the Rialto including Tommy Steele, Marty Wilde, Cliff Richard and Adam Faith.



Poster from c.1960. Changing musical times.

In 1961 the venue was acquired by Mecca and the cinema closed, the last film being 'The World of Suzie Wong' and live entertainment would now be the key feature. The magnificent £4,000 organ was sold in 1962 for £80 to a collector in Bradford. In 1963 the Beatles appeared four times at the Rialto; on 27th February when headliner Helen Shapiro did not appear due to illness; 13th March when John Lennon did not play as he had lost his voice; 29th May, and finally on 27th November.



Photographs of Mick Jagger holding a copy of Ouse Beat, the York music scene magazine and the Beatles peering from a window at the crowds of fans

By the late 1960s the venue had become a nightclub, the Cat's Whiskers. There was a resident band called the Richard King Set which soon changed its name to Festival, and later Tin Biscuit. With live cabaret acts, dancing and supper, the venue provided a full night out for young people, closing at 2am.





Tin Biscuit in the 1970s

The band played five nights a week and sometimes backed cabaret singers, but not continuously, as there was also a DJ playing the records from the charts of the time. The box office was at the entrance to the club, with a long passageway and speakers playing the music from inside. The soft furnishings were in crushed velvet and there were small lights and brass fittings. Then, before the main entrance, there was the cloakroom and a kiosk which sold cigarettes, cigars, sweets and chocolates. Inside the club were little tables around the dance floor, with lots of booths and seating further away.



MECCA in the 1970s

By the early 1970s the club had divided into several venues, with the Heartbeat Discotheque at the back of the building, and Tiffanys at the front alongside the Cat's Whiskers.

Jack Prendergast died in 1978, which was the end of another era. In 1982, because of local objections, the music licence was not renewed and the Rialto became a snooker, pool, darts and leisure complex.

In 1985 the social club reopened after improvements costing nearly £400,000. But again this was unsuccessful and Mecca turned the premises into a bingo hall, as it did with various such venues up and down the country. The Clifton Cinema, owned by the two nephews of Jack Prendergast, went this way, and still continues.



Jack Prendergast's Art Deco building converted into a MECCA bingo hall, pictured shortly before demolition in 2003. (photos; 28 days later website)

Many York people were saddened to see the old Art Deco Rialto building from 1933 being demolished nearly 40 years after the Beatles had appeared there, to make way for a new bingo hall.

But worse was to come. In 2021 it was announced that the Mecca Bingo Hall, which had been closed during the pandemic, was to be demolished and replaced by student flats. Another large piece of York's history to disappear!

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