

The Rivoli *by James Platt*

Alongside where Bellevue Terrace opened onto Back Hill stood the neat cottage of Mr & Mrs Charlie Lobb. A well-manicured evergreen hedge facing onto Back Hill enclosed its small front garden. The same stand of evergreens, which made up this hedge continued, albeit in a creeper tangled riot of wild abandon, right down Back Hill as far as the entry to St Peter's Church.

Charlie was a kindly man with a common touch. He owned a set of garages and lockups right at the top of Back Hill, fronting onto New Road. The garages ran all the way back behind the Church Rooms towards the wall of the Coastguard station. There was a repair and servicing shop at the front, a darkish barn in which to judge from the floor, much oil had been spilled over an extended period of time. In the floor, an inspection pit loomed like a fearful black hole. Charlie's mechanic was Bert Keat, who was a permanent grizzled presence limping in and out of the dimness.

Right at the rear of Charlie's garages was an extension, which was arguably the most important building of its time in Port Isaac. This was the legendary 'Rivoli', converted by Charlie into an entertainment institution which hosted a weekly cinema, and which had been the venue for more dances and concerts than could safely be forgotten.

The Rivoli for a time had its very own resident musical trio known as the 'Rivolians', consisting of Mr & Mrs Brimmacombe and Mrs Boss Richards. Brimmy played the violin, Mrs Brimmy the drums and Mrs Richards somehow fought to keep time with them on the piano.

The Rivoli was concrete floored and clad outwardly in corrugated sheets. Inside, no matter how many bodies were packed in and no matter what the season, cold reigned. The cinema screen was a big white sheet drawn tight above the small trestle mounted wooden stage on which the Rivolians performed.

Dances were held in the Rivoli mostly in the summer months, but the problem to solve was that the concrete floor was antipathetic to the soles of shoes and the friction generated made keeping time with the music on the occasions that the music was in time, a near impossibility. The liberal use of ballroom chalk to promote ease of gliding served to turn the floor of the 'Rivoli' into a passable imitation of an ice rink. Feet shot off in all directions placing their owners in positions incompatible with the kind of dance floor decorum, which Victor Sylvester might have admired but which was the stuff of life to the Rivolians.

For the cinema, the hall boasted several rows of 'shilling' seats, many of which, prior to the salvage, may have graced a cinema more conventional, but never more illustrious than the Rivoli. These seats tilted and were covered in faded threadbare blue plush. Dust puffed around every backside lowered onto one of them. When there were dances held in the Rivoli, the seats were removed and stored at the back of the building. Given the popularity of the cinema, a lot of the seats were tacitly understood to be regularly spoken for. There were few crimes more heinous than occupying a seat, inadvertently or deliberately it made no difference, of one

who had assumed the right of property by dint of frequency of use.

With Charlie and Mrs Lobb lived Mrs Lobb's father, Mr Roseveare, known to us as 'Rosie'. Rosie was a moderately heavy set man, slow moving on account of his age. The remaining hair that he had on his head was so fine and white, inclusive of his clipped moustache, that he appeared to be as good as bald. His nickname matched his general temperament in all matters save one. Rosie was retained by Charlie as the usher at the 'Rivoli' with a prime responsibility, at least as Rosie saw it, of ejecting boys from cinema performances whenever the vestige of an opportunity presented itself. This was a game in which all the players knew their roles and played them to the hilt.

In front of the plush seats at the 'Rivoli' were a number of wooden benches – long, hard, rude of construction and backless. These were the 'sixpennies' where all the boys sat. Prior to the lights going down, the boys, under Rosie's beady eyes, were obliged to maintain a modest decorum. Few were ever evicted prior to the commencement of a film, but Rosie was always ready to pounce.

The entry to the 'Rivoli' was U shaped, swathed around a central corrugated sheet of metal. It had an objective of reducing the capacity of light to penetrate on summer evenings. Inside the entry Rosie would be vigilantly standing. Miss Roseveare, his daughter, would be seated at a small table, taking the entry money and issuing tickets from a roll. Rosie then tore the tickets in half to validate them.

Music was always playing when you entered and it was always the same sequence of music, one or other of a few 78rpm records which never wore out. These, in particular Mantovani's 'Charmaine' and 'Hunmoresque', became hauntingly familiar. I have only to hear the slightest snatch of the former and Rosie and the 'Rivoli' are alive again.

Although the Rivoli was owned by Charlie, the cinema projection equipment was the property of Mr Oliver from St Teath who ran what was a travelling cinema, taking films, shorts and serials around the district, a different stop each night. 'Cinema at the Rivoli' was every Friday. The narrow posters advertising coming attractions were awaited with impressive eagerness. A standard Rivoli showing might consist of a 'big film' and a 'full supporting programme', the latter comprising a cartoon, a travelogue or perhaps a 'Pete Smith Speciality' or a 'Crime Does Not Pay' feature. Sometimes, but not often,



The Rivoli was converted into several cottages, called Dolphin Cottages, in the 1970s

there might be two films shown consecutively in which case one would be the 'big film' and the other the 'little film'. Most popular of all were cliffhanger serials like 'The Clutching Hand' and 'Flash Gordon'.

The boys were on their best behaviour before and during the showing of the latest episode of a serial as it would have been disastrous to miss it owing to being thrown out by Rosie. The serials were acted out and embellished in the games we played through the succeeding week, as were also the subjects of the 'big films' themselves when these involved cowboys and Indians, swordplay of any kind or Johnny Weismuller as 'Tarzan'.

Mr Oliver's equipment was serviceable but suspensions of service through mechanical failure, a sudden unscheduled split in the continuity of the film, a change of reel or reels shown out of sequence were not uncommon. Such aberrations were the trigger for the game to commence with a cacophony of whistling and yelling to break out from the front benches. The same level of justifiable protest from these benches was also reserved for high boredom quotient dramatic features, as well as for the romantic sequences in what was known as 'kissing films'. At such junctures Rosie would enter the game by moving into action under cover of darkness, his hands seeking a purchase on any jersey or coat, grasping for all the world like Blind Pew on his way to the 'Admiral Benbow'. We lay on the floor under the benches or scuttled back towards the plush seats for better cover. Rosie never moved in to the realm of the plush seats.

No matter, Rosie always got someone. Innocence served for nothing with him and the captive was ceremoniously evicted into the night through the galvanised sheet entry. Having made a kill, Rosie's hunting instincts were satisfied for the moment and those remaining were safe until the next overlong screen kiss or problem with the projector gave rise to the customary stamping, whistling and barracking and set the game in motion once more.