

Cameron's Building

The Coronation / Liberty Theatre and the Cameron Family



The present day shop facade of the Coronation/Liberty Theatre

Entertainment for the citizens of Gympie has consisted of various forms over the years. Today we have modern halls, theatres and cinema to cater for the locals but it is not known to the general public that behind the modern shop facades in Mary Street, a small piece of history has been preserved. On the 20 July, 1927 J. & L. Cameron advised the Town Clerk, Gympie City Council that they had purchased from Mr. John White the property known as "The Peoples Cash Store" on the 1 July, 1927. They immediately started building a new complex, shops with living accommodation above. Prior to that date their business was on the Post Office side of Peter Patrick's business. Approximately 1935 they built a skating rink at the rear of the original complex.

In August, 1938 the Cameron's built a new picture theatre to replace the Coronation Glideway Skating Rink. The four large columns that supported the roof had to be demolished and the roof redesigned. The timber floor, used for the skating rink which had the floor boards laid in circular formation, was retained.

The new theatre building was opened by the Mayor, Aid. L.J. Thomas and supported by Mr. T. Dunstan, M.L.A. on Saturday, September 3, 1938. The picture programme commenced at 7.15 pm and the opening took place at 8.15 pm on Saturday night in the presence of a large house that must have gratified the proprietors.

The Mayor complimented the proprietors upon their initiative in giving to Gympie a theatre that compared without discredit with any other picture theatre outside the metropolis. There was a great business risk in such an undertaking and it was pleasing to find business people with sufficient faith in Gympie to take the risk. Not only had Miss and Mr. Cameron accepted responsibility for such an enterprise, but they had not spared any pains to make their patrons comfortable in every possible way.

There was seating accommodation for 1250 on a comfortable scale and ample room in emergency for several hundred more. In the splendid dress circle were 400 deeply sprung and padded seats, the occupants of which could look directly at the centre of the screen. On the floor of the hall were nearly 1000 more and the rows were so placed that occupants of seats would not be inconvenienced by patrons moving in or out past them in the same row. Room was left to stretch one's legs to full length. The seats were Dunlopillo, the well known latex product. In the front of the dress circle was a mayoral box which commanded a comfortable view of the proscenium, the border of which was

picked out with a delicate decorative pattern of blue and gold painted by Mr. W. Abbott. When the screen was not in use it was hidden by a drop curtain of gold chenille that weighs a hundred weight and shimmered beautifully. The side doors were also concealed by heavy blue curtains with artistically designed modernistic pelmets. The modern character was noticeable everywhere -in the electric light globes, in the design and furnishing of the foyer and in the seating arrangements which appeared to preclude foreshortened views of the screen even at the extreme ends of the hall.

The acoustic properties of the auditorium were tested by Mr. J.W. Greene of Brisbane. During this week by dropping a beam of timber on the floor and not an echo reverberated in the hall. The walls are of fibrous plaster and the ceiling (in which is a specially designed ventilation system) is of asbestos. A result of this apart from its admirable effect upon sound, is that the theatre was fire proof. Practically speaking the floor was the only part of the whole building that would burn, even the frame work of the seats were of solid metal. Down the aisles however, were runners of matting the weight and texture of which rendered them negligible as an inflammatory agent.

The foyer had an attractive as well as utilitarian appearance. This lead from the Mary Street entrance, through what was the showroom of J. & L. Cameron's business premises, presently Ladybird, 70 feet back to the main entrance to the theatre and 20 feet wide. Thus there was no need for patrons, waiting to meet friends before going in, to stand about the public footpath: they waited in the foyer where there were comfortable seats and lounge couches. These, being against the walls, never obstructed the passage of patrons.

Pictures, mirrors, flowers and ferns and the blue and gold decorative motif characterised the foyer also. The ticket boxes, one at each side were placed at the far end of the foyer near the theatre door so this, too, should obviate obstruction of the public street by a queue of ticket purchasers. Between the ticket offices and the door to the hall (again on each side) there was a splendid large lavatory accommodation which was the last thing in scientific and hygienic systems.

Two very wide escape doors led to Young Street and took probably the greater part of the audience after a performance while the rest emerged into Mary Street from the main door.

On 6 November 1947 the management of the Liberty Theatre, Brisbane, Pty Ltd, took over the Coronation Theatre and renamed it the Liberty Theatre. To conform with the firm's Brisbane suburban and country theatre circuit, the theatre underwent extensive structural alterations, including the provision of a cooling system and modernisation of the theatre entrance, where fluorescent lighting was installed. In addition a milk bar was erected adjacent to the main building. Modern sounding materials were used to give listening perfection. Towards the end of its life as a theatre it was used as a skating rink and picture theatre. I believe the theatre closed 1965/66.

The rear doors to Young Street, the splendid large lavatory accommodation, ticket box, dress circle and the chenille curtain are still there unchanged. The Mayoral Box is now a landing with steps leading to it. The skating rink floor is intact and the projection equipment has been stored.

The flat above Craftwheel Gallery and Navy Jones, used by Mr. and Miss Cameron still has their furniture in it.

By M. Burkhardt & D. Kay