

The Victoria Centre, Knifsmithgate, and adjoining buildings

History

On October 27th 1911 an exhibition match was played between Ernest Rudge, the champion of South Yorkshire, and P.W. Hughes, a leading Yorkshire professional from Leeds, to mark the opening of a temperance billiard hall to the rear of 11 Knifsmithgate¹. Ernest Rudge was soon recognised as the best billiard player in the area and a promising young player, Joe Davis, was taken by his father to see if Rudge would give him lessons. The rest is history! In 1913, aged 12 years, Davis scored his first 100 break. At 13 he won the Chesterfield and District Amateur Billiards Championship. He turned professional when 18-years-old, and became World Billiards Champion in 1928.²



¹ Inglis, S., 'Temperance billiard hall', *Conservation Bulletin*, no. 68 (summer 2012), pp. 14–15.

² Davis, J., *The breaks came my way* (W.H.Allen. 1976), pp. 15–18.

The entrance to the hall was via a passageway, still there today, between the Tool & Mallet public house on the north side of Knifsmithgate and 11 Knifsmithgate. The hall itself was one of the buildings that originally formed part of the Victoria Foundry of Oliver & Co. opened in 1860. The company built much larger new works alongside the Midland Railway, with an office block fronting Markham Road (which later became the premises of Markham & Co. Ltd) and the Victoria Foundry was sold in 1877.

At some stage a warehouse was erected over the building which formed the hall. In 1899, when it was occupied by Alexander Todd Furnishers, the hall was described as having a showroom downstairs and a workshop above.

In December 1911 Henry Brier of Leeds was granted planning permission by the borough council to convert the warehouse above the billiard hall into a cinematographic theatre. It was opened on 14 April 1913 as the Victoria Picture Palace.³

In 1920 a new company, Victoria Enterprises Ltd, was formed to acquire the Victoria Picture Palace, the undertaking and assets of E. Rudge & Company Limited, the freehold of the building containing the cinema and the Victoria Billiard Hall, and other land abutting on Knifsmithgate, to enable the site to be redeveloped. Included in the company's prospectus was an artist's impression of the new building.

³ Brian Hornsey, *Ninety Years of Cinema in Chesterfield* (Stamford, Fuchsiaprint, 1992), pp. 6–8.



The architect was named as W. Cecil Jackson, who was by this date in failing health and, before he died in 1926, he took William Fryer into partnership and it was Fryer who oversaw the construction of the buildings from the Victoria to the Gas Board Showrooms. This was the description of the proposed scheme:

The handsome block of buildings will stand upon 1,940 square yards, and will comprise Cinema House to seat 2,000 persons, large Billiard Saloon for 35 tables with private and exhibition rooms, large Café, Restaurant, Smoke Room, Tea Room and Ball or Assembly Room. The whole throughout will be fitted and decorated in the latest and most up-to-date manner. In addition to the above, there will be nine double fronted shops, with spacious cellars, the rent of which will bring in adequate return.

The plans of the building have been approved by the Corporation.

The cinema and billiard hall closed in July 1924 for reconstruction and re-opened in December that year, with a new foyer and the rear part of the circle of the cinema projecting over the adjacent furniture store.⁴ On the ground floor, the large billiard

⁴ *Derbyshire Times*, 20 Dec. 1924 p. 6: Chesterfield's newest cinema house.

hall had 20 tables. It was important that the building was erected as quickly as possible: billiards was probably at the height of its popularity due to the success of Joe Davis and, also about the same time, plans were being submitted for another cinema in the town, the Picture House (later the Odeon, now the Winding Wheel). The design of this competitor may also have influenced the change of design for the new Victoria.



Photograph thought to be taken on the occasion of the opening of the billiard hall as Ernest Rudge and the commissionaire are standing where the shops were later erected.

The new complex was built in stages as Knifesmithgate was widened by setting back the building line on its northern side (the southern side was less heavily altered and some older property survives there today). Finally in 1930, the rest of the building, including the ballroom for 500 on the second floor, a restaurant on the first floor, and shops and a branch of Barclays Bank on the ground floor, was completed.

Derbyshire Times, 12 July 1930, pp. 4, 5, 7: Chesterfield's new shopping area – the development of Knifesmithgate. Description of ballroom and restaurant at the Victoria on p. 5



The cinema remained independent of the major chains until 1956, when Victoria Enterprises was sold to the J. Arthur Rank Organisation. The site comprised the cinema, which was renamed the Gaumont, the ballroom, café, billiard hall, snack bar and sweet shops, and a furniture store and property on Elder Way. Shortly afterwards, in December 1957, the Victoria Billiard Hall, where Joe Davis took the early steps which took him to his world-famous professional career in billiards and snooker, closed after nearly 50 years and was converted into a bingo hall. Once well-known groups, such as The Who and Bill Haley and the Comets, played in the ballroom until Rank sold the complex, and groups continued to play in a smaller way for about another six years in the restaurant. A night club used the ballroom until a few years ago, but now there is no public access to the second floor. The lower floor of the cinema and the billiard hall were converted into an arcade of small shops. These have been progressively vacated in recent months and the arcade is now closed.

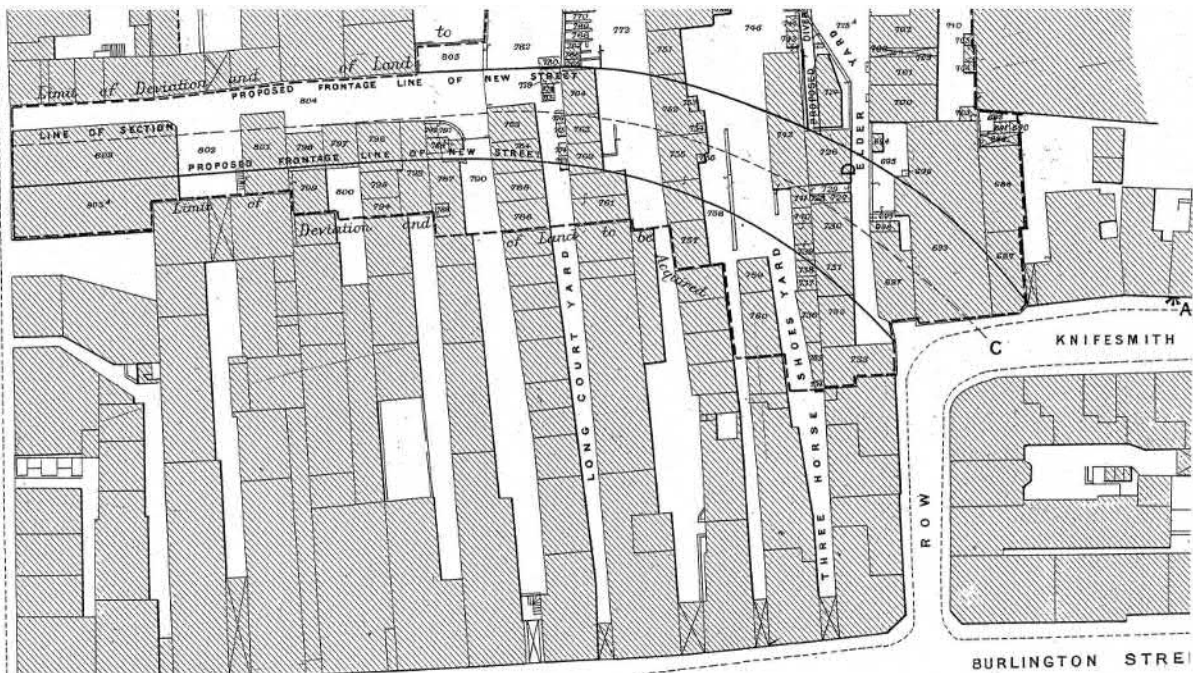
Architecture

The building is steel-framed with half-timber frontage above an ashlar-faced ground floor. The original plans for the Victoria were lost in the floods of June 2007, although plans of 1962 have survived ⁵. These show that externally the building is unaltered. Internally there have been changes but the original spaces occupied by the billiard hall, cinema, restaurant and ballroom are identifiable. The restaurant remains, although latterly it became a café

Elsewhere, most of the fixtures and fitting have been removed, although the ballroom floor remains.

The Victoria is one of a number of Tudor Revival buildings in Chesterfield town centre, most of which were erected in the 1920s partly as the result of extensive road improvements at that time. About 1920 the original Knivesmithgate was widened resulting in the demolition of the frontages on the north side. The road was also extended westwards to Glumangate.

⁵ Gaumont Restaurant Floor Plans. Derbyshire Record Office. D6116/29



Chesterfield Corporation Plans and Sections 1913 (in Parliamentary Session 1914). Work No. 24 New Street from Knivesmithgate to Soresby Street) Chesterfield Corporation. 1913
The extract shows the new street from Knivesmithgate to Glumangate (on the left). Although the street was originally intended to continue to Soresby Street this did not happen until later.

The borough council brought in a regulation that owners of adjoining land intending to build or rebuild on Knivesmithgate and its extension should carry the first floor over the pavement to be supported on columns.⁶

⁶ Minutes of evidence taken before the Local Legislation Committee on the Chesterfield Corporation Bill commencing Thursday 14th June 1923. House of Commons Session 1923 (HMSO). See in particular clauses 693– 698 (p. 229) and 708–709 (p. 230). Copy in Chesterfield Local Studies Library.



The intention was that these arcades on the newly extended street should provide shelter for shoppers in wet weather. The Victoria (including Greaves furniture store), together with R.J. Stokes's shop, the Gas Board showrooms and the King's Head form the arcade to the north of the widened Knifsmithgate. The Victoria and the two adjacent buildings were designed by W.C. Jackson (later Jackson & Fryer) and the King's Head by another firm of Chesterfield architects, Wilcockson & Cutts.

The external decoration of the main elevation to Knifsmithgate is unaltered.



The leaded gothic windows show a connection with the Arts and Crafts movement. Of the Tudor Revival buildings in the town only the Victoria and the Gas Board showrooms have such windows. At the head of every other column there are carved grotesques . These are the work of Frank Tory & Sons of Sheffield



This one shows remnants of the gold leaf with which they were originally covered.

At the west end of the range, in the corner of the building which originally housed a bank branch, there is a mosaic of stone blocks.

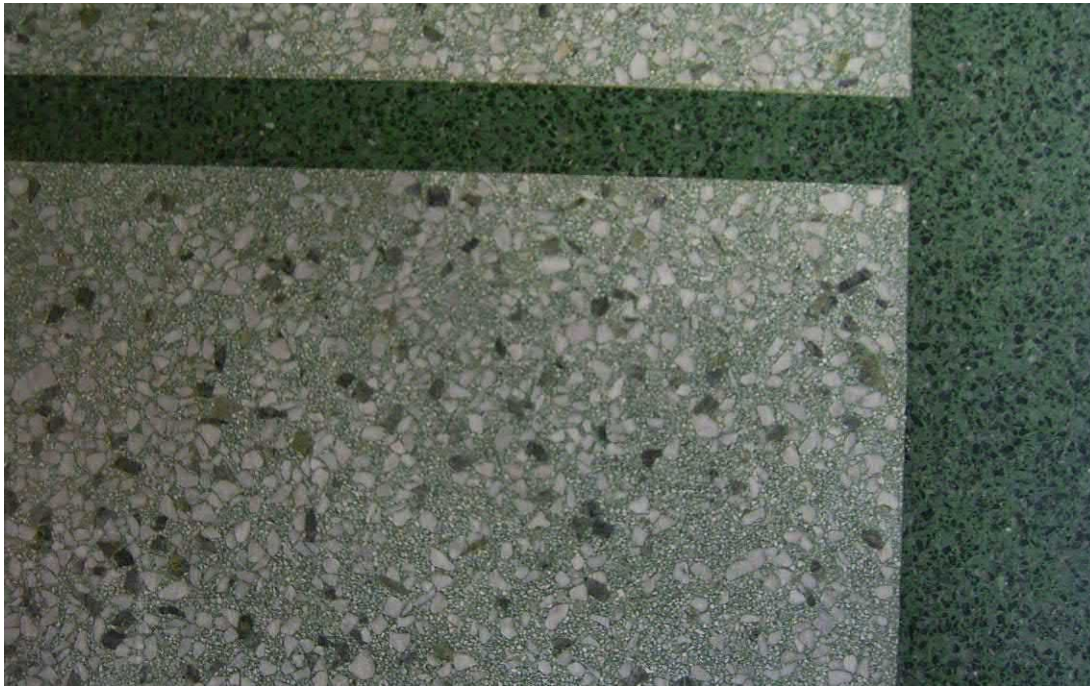


Above the main entrance to the cinema, ballroom etc. there is a stone carving.



This actual entrance was originally set further back than it is today.

The entrance and foyer are paved with marble mosaic, which according to press reports at the time of the opening is Italian marble. The exterior mosaic is still visible but the interior is covered by carpet.



The mosaic continues up the stairs to the foyer outside the cinema, where it is assumed to have survived but is covered by carpet. The mosaic then continues up the upper flight of stairs to the second floor



There is plasterwork outside the entrance but this has been damaged by the insertion of a partition at the modern entrance



The foyer has a false ceiling but there were gaps through which the original plaster work could be seen.



It is also visible to the rear of the arch at the bottom of the stairs.



The ceiling of the Cavendish room above the main entrance is exposed



and an early photograph shows that it is original.



Press photos of the restaurant and ballroom before opening 1930 show the layout of the ballroom and restaurant. The ceilings may survive under the false ceilings.

The description of the café, when it opened in 1930, noted that ‘the walls and stanchions are effectively panelled in Colombian pine’, but it is not known whether this window surround is original; all the rest are covered by plaster board.



Conclusion

This group of buildings is one of the most impressive examples of Tudor Revival architecture in Chesterfield and makes an important contribution to the large collection of such buildings in the town. Indeed, few towns of similar size have such a quantity and range of ‘Black and White’ buildings of the 1920s and 1930s, finished to such a high standard, and it is important that the complete surviving corpus be retained. In the case of the Victoria Centre buildings on Knivesmithgate, the external decoration remains largely unaltered. In particular, there are substantial remains of the elaborate 1920s leisure complex, including cinema, ballroom, billiard hall and restaurant.

For additional information about Chesterfield’s black and white buildings refer to

<http://www.blackandwhitebuildingsofchesterfield.co.uk/>