

<b>IDENTIFER</b>	PALACE BALWYN CINEMA		
<b>Other/s</b>	Balwyn Theatre; Balwyn Classic Theatre; Cinema International; Palace Cinema		
<b>Address</b>	231 Whitehorse Road BALWYN	<b>Date/s</b>	1927-30 1968, 1993-94 (major alterations)
<b>Designer/s</b>	"Mr G Apted" (Frank Aswel Apted?) Bernard Sutton (1940s alterations) R G Monsborough (1960s alterations)	<b>Builder/s</b>	W McDonald
<b>Theme/s</b>	5.6.5 Creating Picture Palaces	<b>Heritage Group</b>	Recreation and Entertainment
		<b>Heritage Category</b>	Cinema
		<b>Heritage status</b>	-
<b>Intactness</b>	Good (major changes to cinema interior)	<b>Significance</b>	Local
<b>Condition</b>	Good	<b>Recommendation</b>	Include in HO as individual place



<b>Extent</b>	To title boundaries	<b>Survey date</b>	06/12/13
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## History

The Balwyn Theatre, as it was originally known, was designed c.1927, constructed in 1928-29, and officially opened in 1930. The provision of a picture theatre in the suburb was first mooted a few years earlier when, in 1923, S L Taylor proposed to build one on Balwyn Road, opposite the State School. As this site was in a residential area, the project was not approved by council. The following year, however, a local newspaper reported that "Balwyn is to have a picture theatre shortly.... a private residence fronting Whitehorse Road, in a central position, has been purchased, and a picture theatre is to be erected there". The project was delayed by further difficulties with rezoning. After three refusals, the proprietors proceeded with construction regardless and, in late 1927, it was moved at a council meeting that "the proprietors of the Balwyn Picture Theatre be notified that they are infringing council's by-law by proceeding with the foundations of a picture theatre within a residential area". It was not until May 1928 that the City of Camberwell finally rezoned the land along Whitehorse Road, subdividing it into blocks for commercial development. Construction of the theatre – to a slightly amended design – duly resumed and, towards the end of 1929, it was reported that "good progress is being made with the erection of the building". It was further noted that the design had been revised to incorporate equipment for screening stereoscopic films (an early form of 3D films), which had then only recently been introduced.

The theatre was a project of entrepreneurs W E & W H Edmonds, who pioneered moving pictures in Australia in 1910, when their "Edmond Brothers Biograph" toured the eastern states. They subsequently opened several picture theatres in Melbourne, including a notably early one at Abbotsford (1911) and two others, the Star (1922) and the Gowerville (1926), both in Preston, before setting their sights on the eastern suburbs. According to an article in *Kino*, the architect of their new Balwyn building was "Mr G Apted". Research has failed, however, to confirm this in any primary source. It might refer to architect Frank Aswell Apted (1870-1943), who practised in Geelong and Bendigo before 1904, when he became a Methodist minister. Despite this radical change of vocation, Apted often acted as honorary architect to the congregations he served – designing, for example, a manse at Maryborough (1912) and a parish hall at Greensborough (1930). Apted registered as an architect in Victoria when it became compulsory in 1923, and maintained his registration until his death. At the time that the Balwyn Theatre was mooted in the late 1920s, he lived in Malvern East.

The new Balwyn Theatre was officially opened on 4 January 1930 with a screening of *Innocents of Paris*, a talkie musical starring Maurice Chevalier. As was succinctly noted by a local newspaper, "the new picture theatre opened in Balwyn on Saturday night. There was a crowded house". At that time, it had a capacity of 1,478 seats (comprising 852 in the stalls and 626 in the dress circle) and, according to one eyewitness, extra chairs had to be provided for the patron overflow. The venue proved popular thereafter, with film screenings as well as performances of live music and stage acts. There were a few early niggles, including fire damage in June 1930 (barely six months after opening) and again in March 1933. That year, the dress circle was altered to increase leg room, and a foot-warming system (comprising cast iron plates mounted on hot water pipes linked to a boiler and pump at the rear) was installed. In 1941, the premises was taken over by another company, Kooyong Theatres Pty Ltd, which engaged architect Bernard Sutton to make various front-of-house improvements, including a new main staircase, toilets, lounge area and offices. The bio-box was altered, and the seating was reconfigured to providing 792 in the stalls and 758 in the dress circle (thus reducing capacity to 1,370). Further changes were made (again to Sutton's design) in 1947, notably a pram parking area under the main stairs. The seating was reconfigured again in 1952 (this time by theatre specialist architects Cowper, Murphy & Appleford), reducing capacity to 591 in the stalls and 564 in the dress circle.

In 1968, the theatre was acquired by the Village chain, and was again upgraded. Carried out by noted theatre architects R G Monsborough & Associates, this work included air-conditioning, further reconfiguration of seating (bringing the total capacity to 827), and a new facade at street level, with segmental arched windows and mosaic tiled surrounds. Re-badged as the Balwyn Cinema International, it was operated by Village until 1986, when it was acquired by AZ Associated Films Ltd. In the early 1990s, when traditional single-screen cinemas began to be superseded by larger suburban multiplex cinemas, it was proposed to similarly convert the Balwyn Theatre. The area occupied by the stalls was subdivided to create two smaller cinemas, designated as Cinemas 2 and 3, while the former dress circle was altered to create Cinema 1, with a capacity of 400. While this adaptation necessitated some quite radical changes to the building (including the raising of the roof, the cutting back of the dress circle and installation of new seating), the original proscenium was retained, as were the pre-war foyers and staircase. The new Palace Cinema, as it became known, re-opened in February and March 1994, and remains in operation to this day.

## Description and Integrity

The former Balwyn Theatre is a large rendered brick building that retains the typical form of a pre-war cinema – that is, a vast gable-roofed shed (containing the cinema proper) that is largely concealed by a flat-roofed front wing (containing foyers and associated front-of-house spaces). The latter presents a symmetrical facade, slightly set back from Whitehorse Road, comprising a central projecting bay and two flanking bays, each defined by tall rusticated piers and curving parapets with moulded capping. The central bay included the words BALWYN THEATRE in rendered lettering, and segmental arched windows with multi-paned sashes (since overpainted), while the flanking bays have rectangular panels with moulded edges and cartouche-like motifs within. In the centre of the facade is a large illuminated blade sign, with the word BALWYN in a light box at the top and the six letters spelling CINEMA in a vertical row of separate light boxes. At ground floor level, the single-storey foyer is built to the boundary line and similar defined with rusticated piers and curving parapets. It has a prominent cantilevered canopy above the footpath, with chasing lights around the edge. The street entrance, as altered in 1968, has a central recessed doorway with multi-paned glazed doors, flanked by segmental-arched windows with modern multi-paned sashes. Walls are clad with green-coloured mosaic tiles, with one window retaining the tiled word PALACE below the sill line.

Typically, the Austin Street (side) elevation of the building is far more utilitarian in its forms and finishes, aside from the Whitehorse Road end, where the a single rendered bay (with matching rusticated piers, curved parapet and moulded panels) returns down the side. The side and rear walls of the cinema proper are otherwise of painted or face brickwork, with some corrugated galvanised steel cladding, and plain gabled parapets with corbelled ends. There is also a steel-framed external fire escape stair.

Although an internal inspection of the building has not been undertaken, it would appear that certain parts of the interior, notably the ground floor foyer and staircase, still retain at least some of their pre-war fabric and finishes.

## Historical Context

Broadly speaking, the construction of the Balwyn Theatre can be seen in the context of the expansion of facilities in the area during the inter-war period, when residential settlement boomed and demand for community facilities increased. More specifically, it can be seen as evidence of the expansion of commercial activity beyond the confines of the original Village of Balwyn (which was concentrated further east along Whitehorse Road, beyond Balwyn Road). This is reflected in the fact that the land on which the theatre was built (and the surrounding land) was re-zoned from residential to commercial in 1928, thus encouraging the construction of new shops that survive to the east of the theatre.

## Comparative analysis

As recorded in the *City of Boroondara Thematic Environmental History*, the first purpose-built picture theatres in the region date back to the 1910s, with examples opening at Maling Road, Canterbury (1913), Burke Road, Camberwell (1914) and Glenferrie Road, Hawthorn (1916), belatedly followed by one at High Street, Kew (1921). All of these, however, have since disappeared, save for the example in Canterbury, which now stands as the oldest surviving picture theatre in the City of Boroondara. Mooted in the mid-1920s but not opened until 1930, the Balwyn Theatre was not only the first new cinema to be erected in the region for some years but was also the first to be erected specifically for the screening of sound films (“talkies”), as opposed to silent films. In this regard, it ushered in the new era of modern “picture palaces” in what is now the City of Boroondara. However, as the theatre was completed on the cusp of the Great Depression, quite a few years passed before this new era came to fruition. It would not take place until the later 1930s and early 1940s, when a spate of new modern theatres spread across what is not the City of Boroondara: the Vogue Theatre in Hawthorn (1936), the Regal Theatre in Hartwell (1937), the Surrey Theatre in Surrey Hills (1939), the Palace Theatre in Glenferrie (1939), the New Glen Theatre in Glenferrie (1939), the New Maling Theatre in Canterbury (1941), the Rivoli in Hawthorn East (1941) and the Time Theatre in Balwyn (1941).

## Assessment against Criteria

The Balwyn Theatre is rare as one of only two early surviving cinemas in the City of Boroondara that predate the “picture palace” boom of the later 1930s and early 1940s (*Criterion B*)

## Grading and Recommendations

The Balwyn Theatre at 231 Whitehorse Road, Balwyn, is a significant heritage place in the City of Boroondara.

### Statement of Significance

*What is significant?*

The Balwyn Theatre at 231 Whitehorse Road, Balwyn, is a large inter-war building comprising a gable-roofed painted brick shed-like form with a flat-roofed rendered brick front wing to the street, with a symmetrical and tripartite facade of rusticated piers and curved parapets. A project of theatrical entrepreneurs W E & W H Edmonds, the building was designed by an architect named Apted (possibly architect-turned-clergyman, F A Apted) and erected by W Robinson. Although the project commenced c.1927, construction was delayed by re-zoning issues, and the theatre was not opened until early 1930. It has subsequently undergone a number of changes of ownership and alteration, over the years, most notably in the early 1990s, when it was converted from a single-screen cinema into a three-cinema multiplex.

*How is it significant?*

The Balwyn Theatre is of historical, architectural and aesthetic significance to the City of Boroondara.

*Why is it significant?*

Historically, the theatre is significant as one of the earliest purpose-built picture theatres to survive in the municipality. It is predated only by the former Canterbury Theatre in Maling Road, which, dating back to 1913, is itself the sole survivor of a number of early (pre-1920) cinemas erected in what is now the City of Boroondara. Mooted in the mid-1920s and constructed between 1927 and 1929, the Balwyn Theatre was the first picture theatre in the City of Boroondara to be purpose-built for sound films ("talkies") as opposed to silent films. As such, it anticipated the notable boom of modern "picture palaces" that took place towards the end of the 1930s, when at least eight new cinemas were opened in what is now the City of Boroondara. The Balwyn Theatre thus stands out as a notable progenitor of this phase in the history of popular entertainment in the City of Boroondara.

Architecturally and aesthetically, the house is significant as a fine example of an inter-war picture theatre in a classically-derived style that characterised this type of architecture in the 1920s, prior to the emergence of the Art Deco style that subsequently dominated cinema design in Melbourne in the 1930s. With its elegant and symmetrical rendered facade incorporating tripartite bays defined by rusticated piers, curved capped parapets and moulded panels, the Balwyn Theatre represents a striking contrast to the slicker architectural styles of such later examples such as the Rivoli Theatre in Hawthorn East (1941). With its massive bulk, prominent double-storey facade and signage, it remains a prominent and eye-catching element in this low-rise commercial and residential streetscape.

### Identified by

Built Heritage Pty Ltd

### References

Alan Windley and Fred Page, "Balwyn Theatre, Victoria", *Kino*, No 49 (September 1994), pp 4-5.

Patricia O'Dwyer, "The Balwyn Picture Theatre", *Balwyn Historical Society Newsletter* (November 2008).

*Box Hill Reporter*, 16 May 1924, 28 October 1927, 29 October 1929, 10 January 1930.

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