

THE  
KINEMA  
AT  
KINVER



BILL PARKER  
&  
NED WILLIAMS

£1.50

ISBN 0 9511223 0 4

DRIVE OUT TO THE

# KINEMA KINVER

Date	Title	Cert.	Stars
THURSDAY July 3rd For 3 Days	<b>STUDENT PRINCE</b> (Colour)	at 5-45 & 9-10	EDMUND PURDOM ANN BLYTHE
	<b>HER TWELVE MEN</b> (Color)	at 7-35 (U)	Greer Garson, Robert Ryan
MONDAY July 7th For 3 Days	<b>DESIGNING WOMAN</b> CinemaScope & Color	at 5-45 & 9-10	(U) GREGORY PECK LAUREN BACALL
	<b>IT'S A DOGS LIFE</b> (CinemaScope)	at 7-45 (U)	Jeff Richards, Edmund Gwenn
THURSDAY July 10th For 3 Days	<b>LES GIRLS</b> CinemaScope and Color	at 5-45 & 8-50	(A) GENE KELLY KAY KENDALL
	<b>THE HIRED GUN</b>	at 7-45 (U)	Rory Calhoun, Anne Francis
MONDAY July 14th For 3 Days	<b>A TALE OF TWO CITIES</b>	at 5-45 & 8-55	(U) DIRK BOGARDE CECIL PARKER
	<b>THE DIPLOMATIC CORPSE</b>	at 7-45 (U)	Robin Bailey, Susan Shaw
THURSDAY July 17th For 3 Days	<b>FROM HERE TO ETERNITY</b> (MegaScope)	at 5-30 & 9-0	(A) BURT LANCASTER FRANK SINATRA
	<b>HELL BELOW ZERO</b> (Technicolor)	at 7-30 (U)	Alan Ladd, Joan Tetzl
MONDAY July 21st For 3 Days	<b>COWBOY</b> (Technicolor)	at 5-55 & 8-45	(U) GLENN FORD JACK LEMMON
	<b>THE TIJUANA STORY</b>	at 7-30 (A)	Rodolfo Audsta, James Darren
THURSDAY July 24th For 3 Days	<b>VIOLENT PLAYGROUND</b>	at 5-45 & 9-0	(A) STANLEY BAKER PETER CUSHING
	<b>EDGE OF HELL</b>	at 7-40 (U)	Hugo Hass, "Flip" the dog
MONDAY July 28th For 3 Days	<b>GUN GLORY</b> (CinemaScope & Color)	at 5-55 & 9-10	(U) STEWART GRANGER RHONDA FLEMING
	<b>TIME FOR ACTION</b> (CinemaScope)	at 7-30 (A)	Robert Taylor, Dorothy Malone
THURSDAY July 31st For 3 Days	<b>CHASE A CROOKED SHADOW</b>	at 5-55 & 8-35	(U) RICHARD TODD ANNE BAXTER
	<b>NO PLACE TO HIDE</b> (Technicolor)	at 7-30 (U)	David Brin, Marsha Hunt

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THE CITY CINEMA IN THE COUNTRY

## THE KINEMA AT KINVER

BILL PARKER  
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NED WILLIAMS

ISBN 0 9511223 0 4

Uralia Press

1986

23 Westland Road, Wolverhampton, WV3 9NZ.

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*Opposite & front cover: the Kinema photographed in the early 30s after the first closure. The poster on the display board advertises Ben Priest's shows at the Futurist, Kidderminster.*



## INTRODUCTION

Kinver is a small village in South Staffordshire. Its size and rural setting are misleading for only a few miles away is the Black Country – the great industrialised area of South Staffordshire (but now part of West Midlands) built above the Ten Yard Seam of coal. For the past one hundred years Black Country folk have made for Kinver in search of country life and fresh air. As a result the village, which has its own long history and Domesday Book credentials, has developed more recently by virtue of its proximity to the conurbation.

Kinver enjoyed its own brief industrial revolution for a time, but the building of the Kinver Light Railway firmly connected it with the Black Country at the beginning of this century. The Light Railway and The Edge are perhaps the two best known aspects of Kinver's story. The latter, and the remains of its cave-houses or "rock-dwellings", still attract many visitors. But what about other aspects of the village's life? The community's own historians have investigated a number of things, but, as far as we know, no one has attempted to tell the tale of Kinver's little cinema: The Kinema.

The story of the Kinema is not lacking in interest. Its promoters proudly opened it in 1921 despite warnings from their friends in

the Black Country. It fell on hard times, was purchased by the legendary Ben Priest seemingly as almost a benevolent gesture towards the community which he had made his home. It closed at the end of the silent film era and lay out of use for nine years until becoming the village Fire Station. Abandoned once more it rose like a phoenix to reopen as a cinema just as the industry was facing new gloomy prospects. The village was now growing fast but other social changes led to the cinema's second demise. Today a Health Clinic stands on the site.

Today, in 1986, it is probably easier to look up Kinver's appearance in the Domesday Book than it is to piece together the fragments of information relating to the Kinema. This book is being published as an attempt to record what has been unveiled so far and possibly to prompt others to help fill in the missing pieces. We still need to be more precise about the Kinema's two closure dates. We still need to know more about the original company that opened the Kinema, and at what stage they gave up the struggle. We still need good photographs of the building.

Meanwhile we hope you will enjoy reading what we have been able to find out about the Kinema and we look forward to hearing from you if you think you can add to the story.

Bill Parker  
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Nr. Stourbridge

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*March 1986*

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all those who have helped piece together information relating to the Kinema:

Sidney Hillman  
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David Bills  
Margaret Roberts  
Doris Mackenzie  
David Hickman

### IN THE BEGINNING . . .

Despite the vagueness surrounding the early film shows presented in the fairground and by travelling showmen it is possible to pinpoint the beginning of Britain's cinema history to one day: 1st January 1910. On that day the 1909 Cinematograph Act came into force and from that moment onwards films could only be presented in premises properly licensed for the purpose and the premises themselves had to observe a number of provisions to gain that license.

Between that date and the beginning of the First World War the cinema industry mushroomed into life and most urban communities had a choice of cinemas by 1914. Many small towns also quickly found themselves able to host the new entertainment medium, and doubtless entrepreneurs would have continued to look for areas into which to expand if the War had not intervened.

After the War the industry was a little less certain of its future and shortages of labour and materials prevented an immediate resumption of the race to provide cinema screens at every possible location. What about Kinver? Although the village was small the Kinver Light Railway's electric trams had linked it with the Black Country since the beginning of the century. It had become both a dormitory from which some residents could commute to the Black Country, and it had become a resort to which people escaped from the Black Country.

By the First World War films could be seen in the nearby towns of Stourbridge and Kidderminster. Possibly someone had by then thought of building a cinema in Kinver itself. Certainly, almost as soon as the War was over everyone in Kinver was introduced to the film industry in quite an exciting way – not the exhibition of films – but their production. In 1919 scenes for the film "*Bladys of the Stewponey*" were photographed in and around Kinver.

"*Bladys*" had its origins in a novel written by the Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould, published in 1897. It was just the kind of action-packed melodrama much loved by early film-makers – and by strange coincidence the production itself was a local affair. The film was financed by Benjamin Priest (1881-1954), the grandson of Benjamin Priest who had established a nut and bolt factory in Old Hill.



The story of the production of this film and its eventual loss, all but for a few tantalising frames, has been told elsewhere and does not directly concern the history of Kinver's own cinema. However, it does introduce Benjamin Priest, who later became the cinema's proprietor, and its production may have convinced a few local people that it was going to be worth investing in film exhibition in the post-war period.

Unfortunately it is now difficult to trace these shadowy figures who did eventually build Kinver's cinema. They formed Kinver Entertainments Ltd., but no records of that undertaking now seem to exist. One of the directors was a Mr. Corbett, and the Managing Director was a Mr. A. S. G. Smith. Stanley Smith, once described in the press as a "Kinver man", was to actually supervise the building and fitting of the cinema, and to eventually manage it. He may have been an ex-serviceman returning to civvy street with money to invest in a business, or he may have had previous experience of the cinema trade. In Kinver he became known as "Cinema Smith".

The cinema was to be built on a fairly ideal site in Kinver High Street, next door to the White Harte. The architects were Messrs Webb and Gray of Dudley. In later years Messrs Webb and Gray were to design the Criterion, Dudley, the Centrals in Stourbridge and Kidderminster, and the Majestic, Cradley Heath, all of which demonstrated their ability to create suitably impressive "palaces" in which to view films. In the case of Kinver in 1920 it was a matter of being much more functional – providing a simple brick built auditorium with Belfast roof, plus a modest foyer/entrance to the street. This edifice was erected by a local builder: W. Basterfield of Stone Lane. Work was not quite completed by the time the cinema opened.

*Note: Readers interested in the story of "Bladys of the Stewponey" should see "The Blackcountryman" for Spring 1970 (Vol 3, No. 2) in which the film-making is described by Peter Barnsley. In the following issue Jack Haden added further information and, more recently, Ned Williams made a further comment on the fate of "Bladys" in Vol 19 No. 1.*

## THE OPENING

The Kinver Kinema opened on Monday 9th May 1921 at 4 pm. It must have been quite an occasion. The ceremony began outside the building – unlike other more formal events held in the auditoria of cinemas. The event was presided over by Councillor Ballard from Dudley. It is tempting to imagine that Mr. Ballard had a financial interest in the venture as he later became involved in the four cinemas mentioned above (all designed by Messrs Webb & Gray) but from his remarks at the opening it seems that this was not so. Councillor Ballard claimed to have warned the Kinema's directors that they were undertaking a risky venture but they had taken no notice! He commiserated with the directors whom he imagined must have been very anxious about the cinema's near completion, and was sorry that the frontage was not finished. He also commented on the number of Dudley residents in the crowd.

The task of properly opening the Kinema was given to Mrs. Goodyear of Wombourne. Her father was another successful Dudley businessman, again emphasising the Dudley connections. Stanley Smith gave Mrs. Goodyear a silver key to unlock the Kinema's doors and she boldly declared, "I have great pleasure in declaring the Kinver Kinema open."

Once inside the party and crowd enjoyed further speeches. Mr. A. E. Timmins, of Kinver thanked Mrs. Goodyear for opening the cinema. He claimed that it was himself who had been instrumental in pushing the Kinema into existence, and in appointing Stanley Smith. The latter's daughter, Madeline, presented flowers to Mrs. Goodyear.

The first film was "*Queen of the Sea*", but a more important part of the programme was a locally made film about the Enville Races. In this film many local people were able to see themselves on the screen – in their very own local cinema! Unfortunately more information concerning this film has failed to come to light. It would be particularly interesting to know who had made the film.

At seven o'clock there was a "second house" and the programme was shown until the Wednesday of that week, to be followed by "*True Blue*" from Thursday to Saturday.

## LIFE AT THE KINEMA

The Kinema settled down to a regular pattern of twice-weekly programmes with shows at 5.45 pm and 8 pm. Matinées were held on Wednesdays and Saturdays; the final days of each programme. Prices for seats were 6d, 9d, and 1/3d.

The *County Express* wrote: "The new Kinema . . . is a thoroughly up to date picture theatre in every respect. It is centrally heated, will provide accommodation for 500, all of who will be in full view of the screen, and every seat is of the comfortable tip-up variety."

Like many early cinemas the capacity quoted seems far more than a building of that size could hold, especially if everyone was in tip-up seats. Not only this but the projection room was inside the main structure of the hall, not tacked onto the back, or above the foyer. There was no balcony but the timber floor was properly raked. The screen was a whitened area of the end wall, and there was just enough space for a pianola to provide musical accompaniment to the films. (At one time the accompaniment was played by Minnie).

One correspondent recalling the early life of the Kinema has mentioned that the local news boy was allowed into the auditorium on Saturday nights to supply the "Racing Edition" to his regular customers. Immediately the auditorium would be lit with dozens of pin points of light as readers struck matches to find out who had "won the big 'un."

Despite the hopes of Stanley Smith and the directors the Kinema does not quite seem to have come up to their expectations, and Councillor Ballard's warnings seem to have been well founded. The cinema could expect to be busy on Monday night when starting a new three day programme, but attendance then faded away. The second three day programme started on Wednesday hopefully building to good business on Saturday night. The management decided not to proceed with a show if less than twelve people were present! On occasion the cashier's boyfriend had to be persuaded to pay to come in to make an audience of eleven into the viable number.

Early cashiers included Doris Purcell (later Mrs. Skidmore) and Kate Lumb. An usherette responsible for taking the tickets was Dorothy Gadsby and her brother, Harold Gadsby, was the

operator. At one time the pianist was a Miss Margaret Glover, now Mrs. Roberts. Perhaps they were as disappointed as Stanley Smith and the other directors when business so rapidly declined. One rare occasion on which the cinema was well filled was when an operatic group from the local Wesleyan Chapel presented "Ali Ba Ba and the Forty Thieves" on the Kinema's tiny stage and the area usually occupied by the first three rows of seats.

Sometime after its opening, and nobody now seems sure how soon after, the Kinema became the property of Benjamin Priest.

Ben Priest had been proprietor of the Grand Cinema in Old Hill, next to the nut and bolt factory, since the Grand's opening in 1913. He had moved his own home from Old Hill to Romsley, and thence to Kinver. Possibly the move to Kinver made it possible to imagine running the Kinema as a sideline under his personal supervision while the Grand at Old Hill was left under the control of its manager, another Mr. Smith: George Smith. Certainly George Smith had nothing to do with his boss's cinema activities in Kinver, nor was the Kinema regarded as part of the 'Ben Priest Group' when two other cinemas were acquired in Kidderminster in 1930.

After the General Strike of 1926 Kinver suffered something of a decline, in both its roles as dormitory for Black Country business folk, and as a tourist spot. The Kinver Light Railway closed in 1930 and it is interesting to speculate on whether the cinema or the trams lasted longer. It seems most likely that the Kinema had already closed by then. It certainly did not survive, in Ben Priest's ownership, to become a sound cinema when that innovation swept the land at the beginning of the thirties.





## THE EMPTY SCREEN

In the Spring of 1930 it seems that Ben Priest acquired the two cinemas in Kidderminster, the Grand and the Futurist. He must have purchased these from the Midland Counties Circuit operated by a Mr. Thompson — the Receiver left running a number of cinemas that had been owned by the Wolverhampton cinema magnate, Thomas Jackson who had gone bankrupt in 1923. Both cinemas had tried "sound-on-disc" but after Ben Priest's arrival on the scene they adopted "sound-on-film" using the Western Electric system, also used by Ben Priest at the Grand, Old Hill.

Ben Priest's concentration on developing these three sound cinemas may account for the abandonment of the "silent" Kinema at Kinver on the grounds that it did not "deserve" such investment in new equipment. Whether Ben Priest had any other immediate plans for the Kinema is not clear. Possibly he intended eventually converting it to sound and re-opening when the time was right — but that time never materialized.

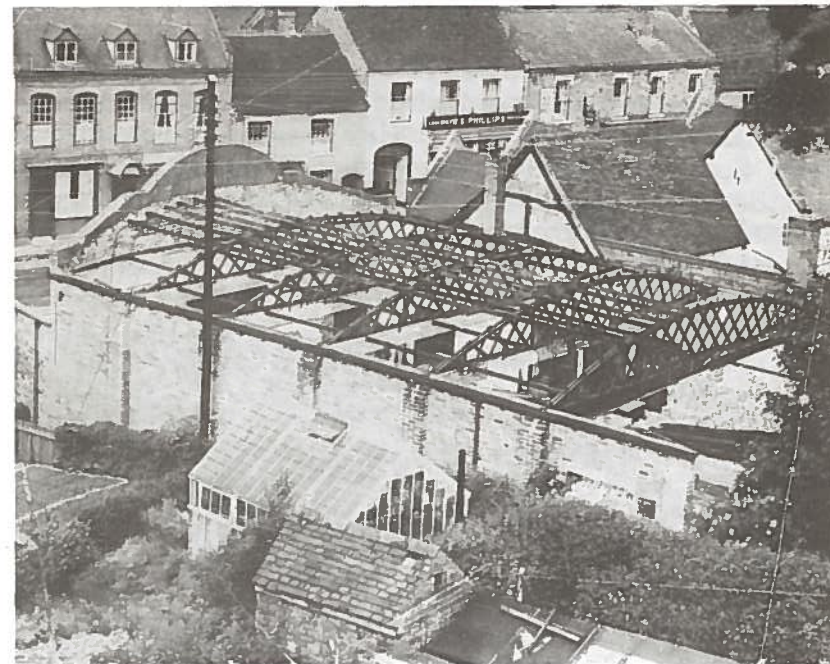
As a result the Kinema lay empty for almost as long as it had been open. A new use for the building only seemed to materialize as a result of events far from Kinver. At the outbreak of World War II the Kinema became a fire station. In his book, *"The Kinver Fire Brigade"*, R. Benbow writes,

... "due to the benevolence of Mr. Benjamin Priest, the old cinema became the Central Fire Station and remained as such throughout the period of the War." Presumably the raked wooden floor was removed and possibly the front of the building had to be demolished or considerably altered. It must have seemed very unlikely that the building would ever be showing films again.

This is supported by a comment appearing in a booklet on Kinver's history that notes;

"Soon after the inauguration of the N.F.S. the cinema underwent dramatic alterations. The frontal section (which originally formed the cinema screen) was opened up and double doors were fitted to give easy access to the main street."

After the War the Kinema stood empty and unused once again. However Ben Priest died on 23rd May 1954 at Forest House, Kinver, and subsequently the Kinema was sold. In 1955 Cecil Jackson, Ben Priest's son-in-law, sold the building to a Mr. Sidney Hillman and a new era began.



*A view from the back of the Kinema taken while Sid Hillman was rebuilding it. The structure of the "Belfast Roof" that Sid Hillman had to remove is very clearly shown. The outline of the front wall of the cinema corresponds with that shown in the cover photograph but it looks as if the former foyer had to be demolished to make way for the new one. The buildings on the opposite side of Kinver High St. will help the reader identify the location. W. S. Phillips, the Grocery Shop, shows up clearly. Pauline Beebee worked in that shop by day, and in the Kinema during the evening.*



*Ben Priest, in flat cap, and his daughter surrounded by the cast of "Bladys" outside the White Harte, Kinver.  
(Stourbridge Library)*

## REBUILDING THE KINEMA

Sidney Hillman was born in 1922—not long after the Kinema had originally opened! His introduction to the cinema trade came at the Olympia, Wordsley. In his late teens he was working at Jones & Attwood in Stourbridge by day, and re-winding films at the Olympia at night. He also helped put up posters for the “Lymp”, and even helped decorate the place.

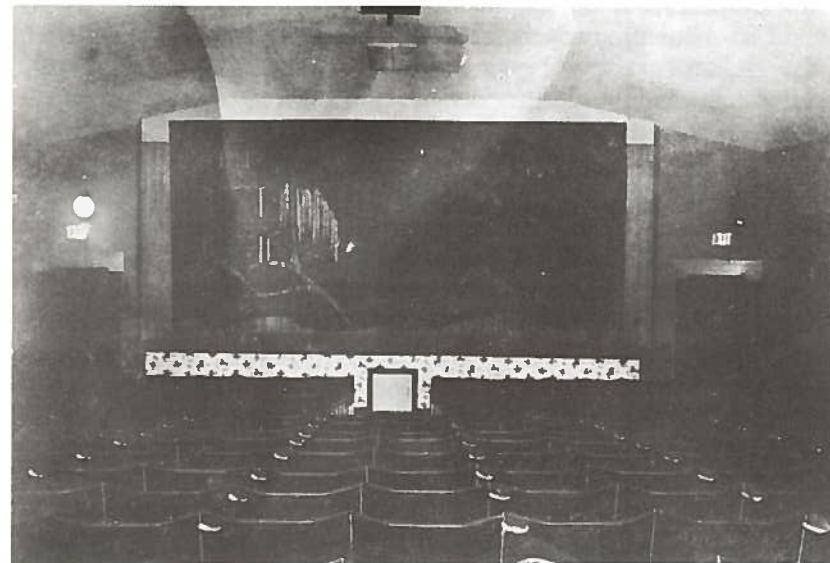
He was working for Mr. Bullock who had acquired the cinema from Fred Leatham, a figure associated with a number of Black Country cinemas. However, working for Mr. Bullock ceased in 1940 when Sidney Hillman joined the R.A.F. When he returned in 1946 he was offered a “junior directorship” as well as the opportunity of being the cinema’s operator. Thus Sid Hillman found himself on the way to cinema proprietorship. He purchased the Ritz at Market Drayton from Fred Leatham and opened it under his own control on August Bank Holiday 1950.

When it became possible to purchase the Kinema five years later it must have seemed a positive move towards owning a cinema nearer home, even though he found himself rebuilding the place while having to keep an eye on business in far-off Market Drayton. In those days he travelled between the two places on a motor-bike.

Sid Hillman certainly undertook most of the restoration of the Kinema himself. He drew up his own plans and did as much of the work as possible himself. He stripped off the old Belfast roof and sold it to an upholsterer who was working on the Kinema’s seats — acquired second hand from the Palace, Wimbledon. A new steel roof was erected. An entirely new projection room had to be built outside the former back of the auditorium. Ross projectors, with an RCA sound system, were acquired from a cinema in Cannock. A new screen was provided by RCA. It was relatively large for the size of the hall — being 27’ x 14’, and RCA provided a masking system that enabled the visible area and shape of the screen to be manually changed from the projection room. This system of pulleys and cables cost £86, compared with just over £59 for the screen but it was the era of the popularity of cinema-scope and independent cinemas had shown themselves more ready to widen their screens than the major circuits! Installation cost a further £55, but all these costs were minor compared with the

price of anamorphic lenses so the Kinema had to share a pair with the Ritz and Sid Hillman had to make sure he did not book cinemascope films in both cinemas at the same time!

Sid Hillman was proud of the interior of the rebuilt Kinema, and many people seem to have been impressed by finding such a smart small cinema out at Kinver at a time when many small cinemas were becoming quite seedy. The capacity of the Kinema was now 396, and the audience faced the High Street looking at the impressive new screen, shrouded by an equally impressive red curtain decorated with a gold weeping willow tree.



Above: Pierre Baskerville's polaroid snap of the interior of the new Kinema.  
Below: Mrs. McKenzie's wedding cake model of the Kinema.





## THE RE-OPENING OF THE KINEMA

The new Kinema greatly impressed the local Fire Officer, Mr. Frost, when he inspected the building and nearly all seemed ready for the opening in April 1956 – after only eight months intense work by Sid Hillman. However, in the grand cinema tradition, not everything was completely finished. For example the steps to the projection room were still being built as shows began! Two operators were recruited by Sid Hillman: George Morgan from Brierley Hill, and Pierre Baskerville who had worked at the Danilo since leaving school until joining the Kinema.

The Kinema reopened on Monday 2nd April 1956 with *"The Student Prince"* – in colour and cinemascope – starring Edmund Purdom and Ann Blythe. The first show was a special three o'clock matinée, but after that the Kinema normally presented two screenings of the feature around one screening of the supporting film during evenings only. The second three day programme was *"Doctor At Sea"*. As a small independent exhibitor success for Sid Hillman was very related to his ability to book suitable programmes, making the best of what was available. The latest major Hollywood epic was rarely likely to reach Kinver very quickly – and, due to structure of the trade, in many cases it could never reach Kinver! In some instances popular films had unexpected receptions. For example, local junior school children were taken to see *"Quo Vadis"* but were upset by the violence.



## THE FINAL DEMISE OF THE KINEMA

In 1956 the Kinema had reopened with as much optimism as it had presumably provoked way back in 1921. It was certainly an excellent little cinema and Kinver was now growing into a much larger village, theoretically large enough to make a cinema a much more viable proposition. As a sign of the times the Kinema had to provide parking for its potential patrons and this was made available on the White Harte's car park. The Kinema advertised its programmes regularly in the *County Express*, the Stourbridge-based weekly paper and possibly hoped to draw its audience from a wide area. The Kinema's handbills exhorted patrons to "Drive Out to the Kinema Kinver – the City Cinema in the Country"! Cinemas were surviving in other small communities, such as Wordsley, Kingswinford and Pensnett despite what people said about changing social habits and the growing popularity of television.



From his home in Kingswinford, Sid Hillman ran the Kinema and the Ritz at Market Drayton with considerable success for the remainder of the nineteen fifties. Staff came and went and many who worked at the Kinema have since left the village. One Kinver resident who worked for Sid Hillman was Pauline Beebee, now Mrs. Brownhill. By day she worked in the grocery shop opposite the cinema (see photograph) but during the evenings she was an usherette and took the tickets. Occasionally she worked in the pay box. While working at the Kinema she saw its audience gradually begin to decline. One cashier, a Mrs. McKenzie, had her wedding cake made as a model of the cinema!

Sid Hillman tried to improve business by presenting three two day programmes per week. (The cinema never opened on a Sunday throughout its life). He later tried to trim costs by ceasing to advertise in the *County Express* in early 1961. The Kinema had reached the point where it was not exactly making a loss but on the other hand it was not particularly worthwhile keeping it going. History had repeated itself. The Kinema had always enjoyed one economy – it was too small to be required to pay Entertainment Tax! But even this could not save it.

*Opposite: Sid Hillman greets local pensioners on the steps of the rebuilt Kinema.*

The closure came in August 1961 and the final evening was such an anticlimax that everyone seems to have forgotten its precise date, or even the name of the last film. Sometime later Ray Mullender, of Brierley Hill, was passing the Kinema. In the late fifties he visited the Kinema to see "Picnic", illustrating the point that a few people did travel to distant cinemas to see certain films they particularly wanted to see. Now he noticed that the Kinema was closed. Peering through the doors he observed that programme times and film stills were still on display, seeming to indicate that the last show had been "Samson and Delilah".

Eventually the abandoned Kinema was sold to the council. The seats went to a Bingo Hall in Blackpool, and possibly the projection and sound equipment was sold for further use. The building was demolished in the summer of 1964, and a Health Clinic was built on the site. The clinic opened on 13th November 1968 and is still in business! Perhaps it is now time that a plaque be placed somewhere on the building commemorating the efforts Stanley Smith, Ben Priest, and Sid Hillman, made to bring cinema to the village of Kinver.

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*"Cinemas of the Black Country" (Uralia Press, 1982) is unfortunately out-of-print. An abridged version may be produced in 1987.*

Uralia Press, 23 Westland Road, Wolverhampton, WV3 9NZ.