

Westerham's War Factory



THE STERLING WORKS WESTERHAM

I clearly remember my father coming home from work one day in the 1930's and him telling me that he had just moved a boiler weighing over five tons into the Phoenix laundry in Westerham, Kent, I thought then what a clever man he must be to move such a massive load without any big machinery such as a crane to help him.

The laundry was the latest use to which the old buildings at the bottom of Hosey Hill near Quebec Square were to be put. Later on when the war started the buildings were converted to a war factory making munitions and where my father would go to work as a maintenance fitter.

I decided to investigate the story of these old buildings and soon found that they were closely associated with the Swan cinema next door. Over the course of nearly 300 years, these buildings were variously used as a malt house, a brewery, a cycle works, a wagon works, a motor garage, a laundry, a cinema a chemical works and a plastics factory. The site is now developed for domestic housing and only a factory chimney and some old names remain.

The Swan Brewery

The earliest reference to the Swan was on the 11th of October 1720 when John Wickham got a lease from the Reverend George Lewis for a building 'in use as a malt house'. It would seem that it continued as a malt house until 1795 when Edward Finnis converted it to a brewery. Edward Finnis's nephew William Edward Watkins actually ran the brewery and when he died in 1822 his eldest son William Finnis Watkins took control. 50 years later William Finnis Watkin's son John was the active partner in W Watkins and Son. The firm was clearly in financial difficulties by the 1870's but they carried on in a quiet way and when in 1889 William Finnis Watkins died at the age of 80 he bequeathed to his son John 'all the fixed plant used in the carrying on of our business of brewers, maltsters and mineral water manufacturers'.

On the 13th of June 1891 John and his wife Ruth laid the foundation stone for a 78 foot high chimney adjacent to the Swan premises on land that was to eventually become the Sterling factory. It must be assumed that they were expanding their premises to meet the growing threat from the Black Eagle Brewery at the other end of the town, however in spite of this they were not able to resist the pressure and in 1897 sold out to the Black Eagle. The Swan Brewery was immediately closed but the malt house continued in use 'for some time'. Some accounts for 1901 show 'repairs to Swan Malt house'.

For some years the brewery continued in use as a vinegar brewery but whether this was in the old Swan or the new part constructed by John Watkins we do not know. We do know that a company called the Kent Vinegar Brewery Company Ltd operated the vinegar works.

The West Kent Cycle Works

In the early years of the 20th century Mr Edward Evenden set up a factory to manufacture bicycles in the new part of the brewery and called it The West Kent Cycle Works. In the Kellys Directory for 1891 he is noted as being a 'coach builder,

wheelwright and forge established in 1822'. but no reference to his business can be found in earlier Kellys for Westerham.

On July 2nd 1910 there was a serious fire that completely destroyed the West Kent Cycle Works. There is a very complete report of the fire in the Westerham Herald for 9th July. It describes how the fire started in the early hours of Saturday morning and was discovered by Mr J Watkins who lived in nearby Stakes House. He raised his household and the maids, pausing only to throw wraps over their night attire raced up the street to raise the alarm. The fire brigade were soon on the scene and with Mr Watkins's assistance fought the fire for five hours and although they were not able to save the West Kent Motor and Cycle Works at least prevented it from spreading to any of the adjacent homes or buildings. Only one corner of one of the malt kilns was damaged, but the total damage was estimated at £2,000, fortunately Mr Evenden was well insured.



After the fire

The name Swan Brewery can just be seen on the side of the old building



The two malt kilns of the original malt house can be clearly seen with slight damage to the left hand one

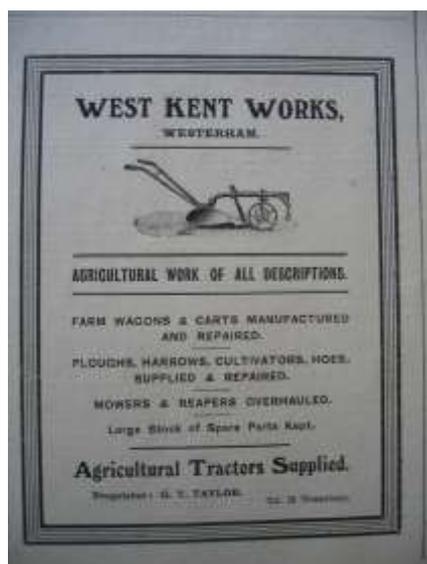
Only three weeks after the fire Mr Evenden put an advert in the local paper to say that business was again in full swing, he also wrote a letter to the paper thanking his friends for their help and support with the loan of premises, tools and equipment.

After the rubble was cleared a brand new building was erected that was to remain in use until it was finally demolished in 2007 to make way for a housing development. This building was of solid brick construction with cast iron window frames, a three bay north light roof*, and a large double door that opened onto the Hosey Road. It is not known who put up this new building, it may have been financed by the fire insurance, Mr Evenden then set up as an ironmonger in the High Street in Westerham and in February and March of 1916 Mr G T Taylor put a series of adverts in the Westerham Herald to say that he 'had taken over the business lately held by Mr E Evenden'.

*A north light roof is a pitched roof with windows in the slope that faces north, this is to admit daylight but not direct sunlight that would make the building hot in the summer.

The West Kent Works

During the whole of the First World War the new factory was occupied by the West Kent Works, the proprietor was Mr G T Taylor and they were solely concerned with agricultural products



The West Kent Works advert from the Westerham Herald

After the war the West Kent Works extended their activities into the sale of new and second hand cars and general garage work, Mr Taylor was now the Managing Director, Mr E C Horton was a Director, Mr J B Franklin was in charge of car sales and they had a capital of £10,000. In addition to the West Kent Works they also owned a cycle shop and garage in the High Street.

In 1919 the whole site and surrounding area was up for auction in five lots. One of the lots was a house called Stakes in which John Watkins was still living as a tenant. Another lot was The Swan Brewery 'now adapted as a cinema' and called The Swan Picture House. This was let to Mr J A Wheeler on a ten-year lease. The biggest lot

was 'The Important Freehold Premises now used as Engineering Works known as The West Kent Motor Works'. In addition to the new north light building there was also a barrel vaulted cellar and many other buildings including an open fronted cart shed with granary over, a 78 ft high chimney, a large yard and a 'farmery' with cow shed, loosebox etc.

Money must have been tight for the only property to sell was the West Kent Works and that was bought privately by the owners of the works.

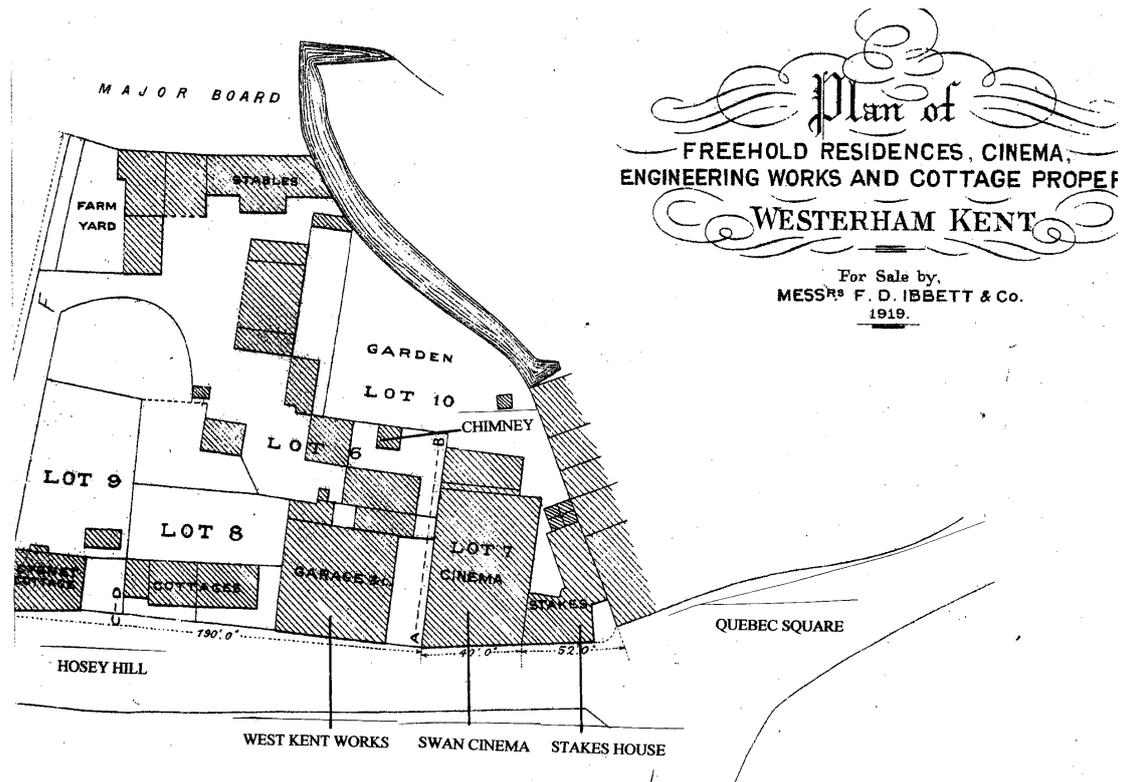
One item not mentioned in the sales literature was a very deep well that was an essential item for malt making and brewing. I particularly remember this well as during WW2 when my father worked at the Sterling he rescued a cat from the well. The cat had fallen in and was floating on a piece of wood, after trying unsuccessfully to entice the cat into a bucket on the end of a long cord and baited with a fish head he had to go down the well and bring it up.



The barrel vaulted cellar



The north light roof



A plan from the sales brochure of 1919

The Safe Joinery Co

By the 1920's the north light factory building housed a company called The Safe Joinery Co. Builders and Contractors. There is a photograph of the factory and the adjacent Swan Cinema which is advertising talking films so the picture must have been taken in 1928 at the earliest.



The Safe Joinery Co

The Phoenix Laundry

The Safe Joinery company did not last very long as by the thirties the Phoenix Laundry was in occupation. It was owned by a man named Ray Godwin who also owned a laundry in East Grinstead. But in its turn the Phoenix was also short lived because in spite of installing a five ton boiler they had gone by 1940. The Sterling Factory was bombed out of London's East End and started their war factory in the Phoenix Laundry after its closure.

The Sterling

The bombing of London's East End started on September 7th 1940 and continued through the whole of September. The Sterling factory was owned by two brothers named Kent and when they were bombed out of their factory on the Isle of Dogs in London's East End one of the brothers who lived in a house on the Avenue which is on the top of the North Downs between the Bromley Road and the Croydon Road, knew Westerham well and was able to take over the empty laundry buildings to house salvaged plant and machinery from London. In late 1940 early 1941, some staff came down with the plant and while they installed it in the old laundry, they lived in Mr Kent's garage.



The staff. The two men in suits and all the ladies are office staff all the other men are engineering staff

Although The Sterling had an iron foundry in London this was not moved, the part of the factory that was moved was the fairly light equipment such as lathes, milling machines, drill presses etc together with shot blasting cabinets, spray booths and caustic baths.



Girls operating drill presses

In addition to the salvaged plant the Sterling was also equipped with new machinery provided by the government.

It was not long before the factory was in full production with many workers recruited locally.



Centre lathes, capstan lathes and sheet metal guillotines

The items that were produced in the greatest quantities were

- 1 Hand grenades. 200-300 per month. These arrived as rough castings and were fully machined and varnished and fitted with all their internal components ready for filling with detonators and explosive.
- 2 Two inch (10 pound). Smoke bombs. 200-300 per month. These, like the hand grenades arrived as rough castings and were machined, varnished and fitted with all internal components ready for filling with explosive.
- 3 Bangalore Torpedoes. 200-300 per month. These were steel tubes about six feet long and two inches diameter and when filled with explosive were used to blow up barbed wire entanglements. Again these were complete and ready for filling when they left the factory.
- 4 Tank track pins. 200-300 per month.
- 5 In addition to the above items the factory made metal cases for Naval electrical equipment, hydraulic connectors for aircraft and many more small electrical and mechanical components.

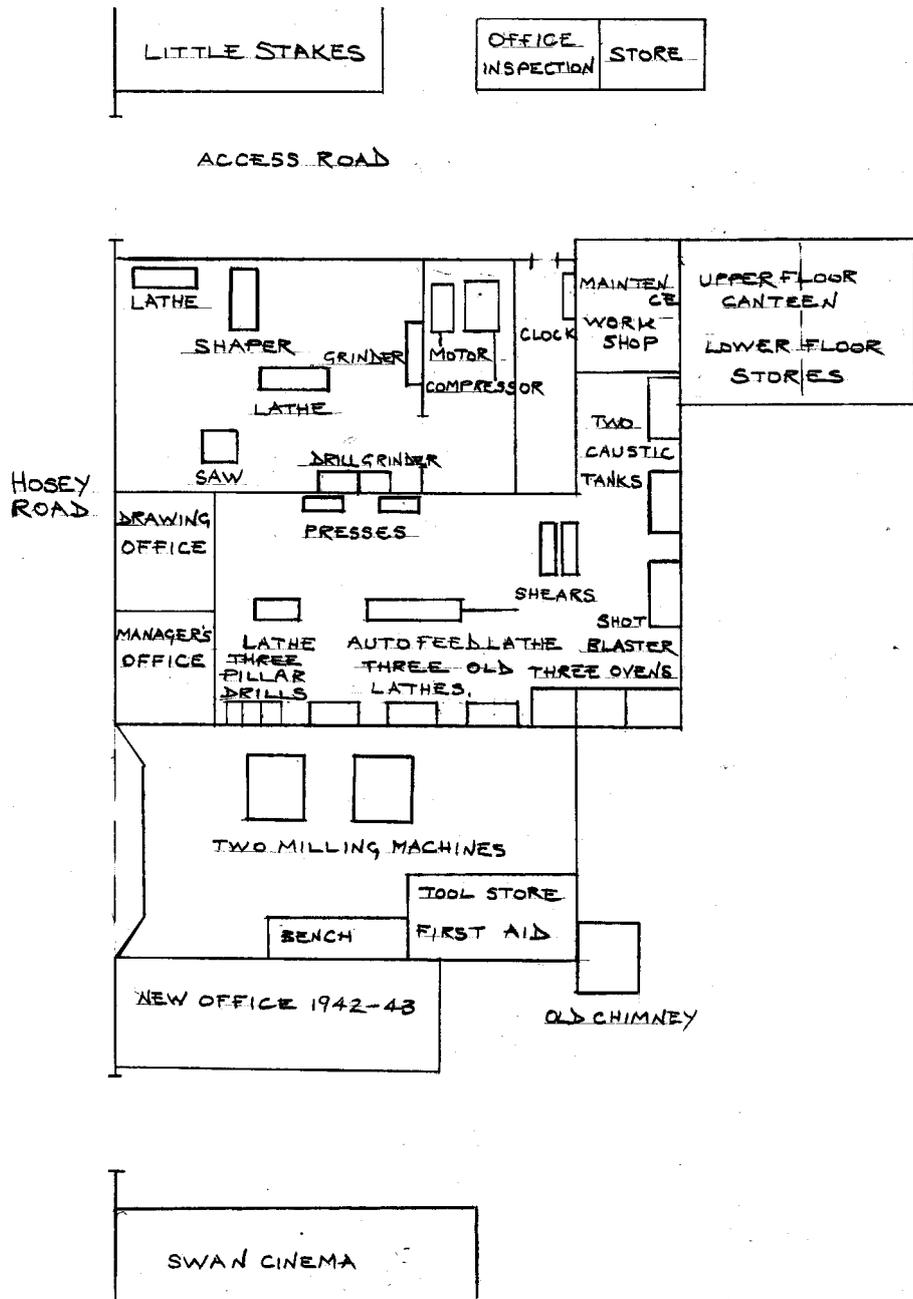
One item that is remembered as something special was the machining of stub axles for the trolleys that carried ten ton bombs out to the aircraft, these axles weighed 70 pounds each and were as much as one person could lift into the machine.

Bert Parsons who worked in the factory towards the end of the war estimated that in the course of the war the Sterling produced 200,000 hand grenades, 60,000 smoke bombs and 100,000 Bangalore torpedoes. (NB This does not agree with the monthly figures above. To agree the monthly figures for grenades should be nearer 3,300.)



The Hand Grenade

The hand grenade or Mills Bomb as it was also known was invented in 1915 by William Mills of the Mills Munition Factory in Birmingham. It was a hand thrown fragmentation bomb used in close contact or house to house fighting. Over 75 million were manufactured in WW1 and it continued in production until 1972. it is not known how many were produced in WW2.



The layout of the Sterling works at the end of the war. Based on a sketch by Bert Parsons who worked there and whose father was foreman



Some of the people from the workshop
The gentleman on the left is Joe Cowell

The total work force of this little factory was about 30 of whom 23 worked on production. The office was in a shop on the green, later a small office was built onto the side of the factory.



A general view of the Sterling in 1944
The building on the left with the pitched roof is the canteen
The white building on the right is the Swan cinema

As the war approached its end plans began to be made to return to peace-time production. Before the war one of the Sterling's products was the mangle, an essential piece of equipment for every household, so before the war actually finished they had made two prototypes of a new wringer with rubber rollers. They were also working on the development of the Sterling machine gun, a replacement for the Sten gun.

The factory closed very soon after the end of the war in 1945 and disappeared with all the machinery and original staff, back to London. For a while several Westerham

people made the tedious journey by train and bus to the pre-war factory in Enfield. They would leave Westerham station at 6.10 am and after several changes arrived at Enfield at 9.00. After a hard days work they would not arrive back until 8.00 in the evening.

While all this war work was going on in the Sterling, with so many troops in the area, the little Swan cinema next door was doing a roaring trade. The only entertainments were the public houses and the weekly dance in St Mary's Hall, so the cinema was in great demand.

Glasby Pharmaceuticals

As things began to get back to normal, if the period immediately following the war could be called normal, the old factory stood empty and then in the late 40's a Canadian gentleman named Mr Pinfold moved in and started a chemical business, Glasby Pharmaceuticals Ltd. He worked entirely on his own and made several products one of which was called New Fakta 4, a concentrated disinfectant.

Glasby Pharmaceuticals did not last very long and by 1963 the factory was occupied by a Mr A Cooper who ran a business making plastic (?) cladding panels and roof lights etc.

Vulcan Plastics Ltd

The last industrial company to use the site was Vulcan Plastics. They came in 1967 and stayed for forty years, the longest occupation by any firm. Vulcan made a range of plastic cladding materials for the building trade and was keen to stay in Westerham and extend their operations.



Vulcan Plastics. Note the space at the extreme right where the Swan Cinema was and the truncated chimney.

In spite of producing a detailed brochure showing how they intended to remove many of the temporary and rather poor buildings that had grown up over the years and replace them with well planned and attractive buildings, it was not to be and in 2007 the site was sold to Portland Homes Ltd, property developers.



Vulcan's plans for redevelopment.

The three blocks nearest the road are the original north light buildings, the pale pink block in the centre is a new building and the darker pink block is the old open fronted cart shed with the granary over it that Sterling used as a store and canteen.



An aerial view of Vulcan Plastics. Note how the site is completely filled with various rather ramshackle buildings

The original north light building can be seen together with the brick chimney of 1891 and the open fronted cart shed with granary over it that predates all the other buildings. The site of the Swan Cinema on the right hand side is now a car park.

The Swan Cinema

What of the Swan cinema? It had been converted to a cinema in 1914. This conversion mainly consisted of stripping out all the malting equipment and the malting floor. The malting floor was a large smooth wooden floor on which damp barley was spread to allow it to sprout, the first stage in the malt making process. With the floor removed this provided a hall 65 feet long by 22 feet wide and open to the roof, it could seat 300 people. The malting kilns were never removed until the whole building was demolished in 1968. The cinema had a little balcony for about ten people with the projector room, which was a 'fireproof compartment' (almost certainly a requirement on the Cinematography Act of 1910) above and behind. It had a 40 foot frontage onto the Hosey Road and the double doors housed the entrance and ticket office. The cinema opened its doors on the 4th of March 1914 and much of the work of converting the old maltings was carried out by Mr E Evenden. The following Saturday the Westerham Herald had a long report on the new cinema and they were pleased to report that the pictures were 'as steady as a rock, and the onlooker did not suffer that dazzling of the eyes by a continuous flicker that was at one time apparent in all cinematographs'. The star picture was 'When the earth trembled'. By January 1915 it was in full swing showing such films as 'Finger Prints' 'The Bowery Boys' 'Fighting Blood' and 'Texas Bill's Last Ride'. All these films were of course silent. There were performances every evening from 6.00 pm and matinees on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Tickets cost 1/- (5p) 6d (2.5p) and 3d (just over 1 p). Mr JW Miller was the lessee and Mr Anderson one of the promoters.

Towards the end of 1915 the cinema closed to allow heating to be installed. The newly heated cinema was back in operation by the end of January 1916 when they screened 'Madcap Queen of Ruritania'.

There were regular showings throughout 1916 but it would appear that takings must have been down as in September the cinema took adverts in the Westerham Herald for three weeks, a thing that had not been necessary before except at the very beginning, but on 27th of January 1917 they announced that the Wednesday matinees would be discontinued until further notice.

In April 1917 Mrs Miller had become the lessee and on the 5th of May a notice appeared in the Herald to say that the cinema would close. The reason given was 'Absence of military and the summer time act had led to sparse audiences and they would have to suspend operations until a more opportune time'.

The Swan reopened on 26th July 1919 under new management with a full programme of three films. Prices for seats were 1/3 (6p) 9d (4p) and 5d (2.0p) The following week the Herald reported that 'Crowded houses marked the reopening of the Swan Picture House'.

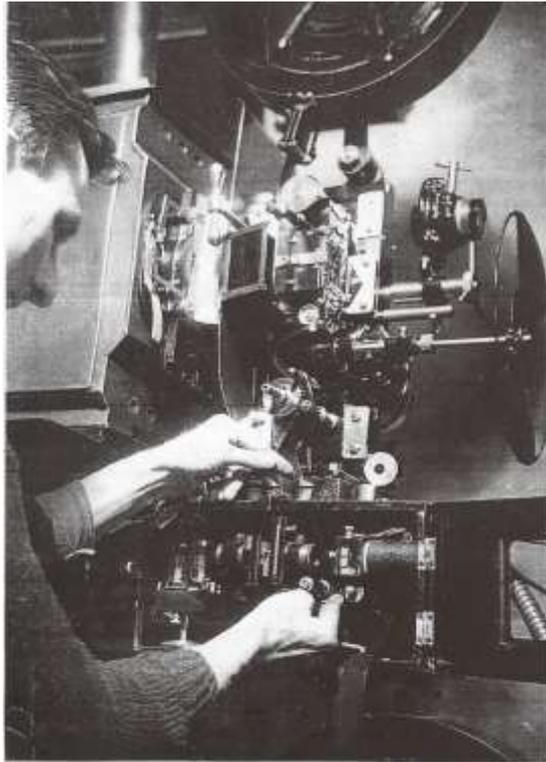


The ad in the Westerham Herald

When the cinema was put up for auction in 1919 it was in the occupation of Mr J A Wheeler who was lessee and manager. In the early 20's it was still showing silent films and the projectionist was Mr Reg Acland. When 'talkies' arrived in the late 20's the equipment was upgraded and Mr Acland continued as the projectionist until the outbreak of WW2. In 1941, he went into war work and Mr George Gutsall took over. At the end of the war Reg Acland returned and took up his old job. During the time that Reg Acland was the projectionist the cinema was owned by a Captain Outrim.



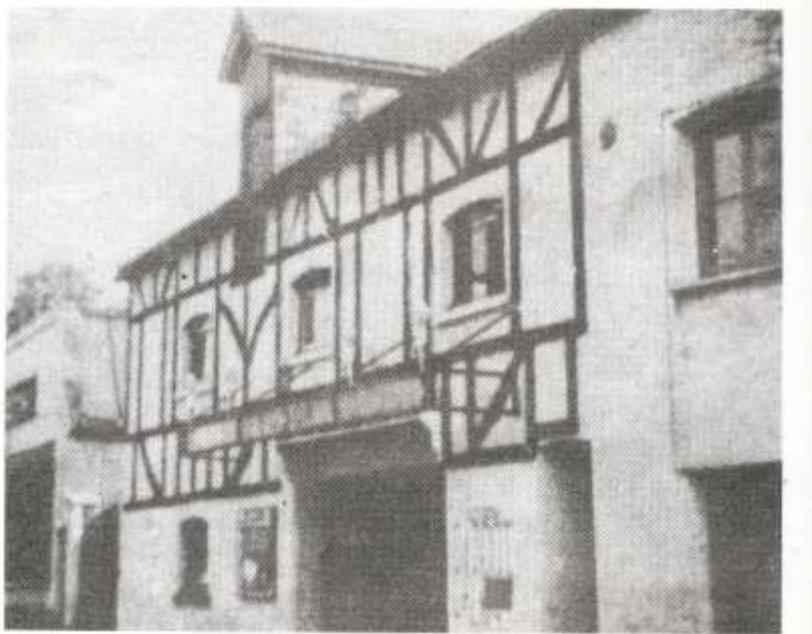
The Swan advertising 'Talkies'



Reg Acland and his talkie projector

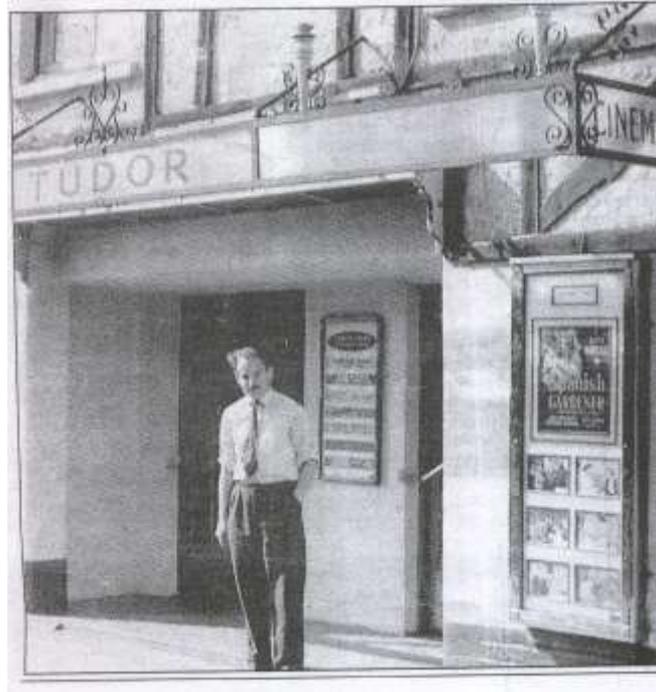
The Tudor Cinema

In 1956 the cinema was managed by Mr and Mrs Feast and the name was changed to The Tudor Cinema and fake beams were added to the front of the building.



The Tudor Cinema with its fake beams

The loading door in the roof dates from the days of the Swan malt house



Ken Osbourne, projectionist (Spanish Gardener released 1956 starring Dirk Bogarde)

The projectionist at this time was Ken Osbourne. In 1959 Cinemascope projectors were installed but in 1963 the cinema closed its doors for the last time. Shortly after closure a fire, that was thought to be arson, wrecked the building. The empty building was not demolished until 1970, when the site became a car park for Vulcan Plastics.



The fire gutted Swan can just be seen on the extreme left of Stakes house
The floods in Quebec Square occurred in September 1968

It has to be said that regardless of whether it was called The Swan Picture House, The Swan Picture Hall, The Swan Cinema or the Tudor, to the locals it was always 'The Flea Pit'.

Portland Homes Ltd

Portland Homes Ltd bought the whole site in 2007 and soon removed every trace of all the old buildings with the exception of John and Ruth Watkins's brick chimney and even that had been reduced in height some time after WW2. While clearing some rubble one of the workmen found the outer cast iron case of one the hand grenades that the Sterling had made in such quantities during the war. He now has it polished up on his mantelpiece.



An artist's impression of four cottages built on the site of the old north light building

In addition to the cottages shown above that are called Swan Cottages, Portland homes also built four other smaller units on the left hand side of the site and other multi-storey units towards the back of the site. The open area between these various houses is called Watkin's Yard.

My thanks for help in preparing this report go to

Peter Finch. Westerham
Bert Parsons Ashford.