

Back from the brink

ALLEN EYLES meets independent circuit owner Charles Morris at the cinema he saved from closure in the suburbs of Leeds



THIS PAGE: Exterior
OPPOSITE FROM LEFT:
Auditorium, Charles
Morris, foyer

LEEDS HAD long seemed a rare bastion of the independent, with the Hyde Park, Lounge and Cottage Road Cinema all surviving as single screens in the northwest suburbs.

The Lounge and Cottage Road at Headingley were the last remaining properties of local circuit Associated Tower Cinemas. After a brave and imaginative refurbishment of the Lounge failed and brought about its closure, the company had little interest in carrying on with just the Cottage Road. It was put up for sale in the summer of 2005.

Enter Charles Morris, veteran saviour of cast-off cinemas. His circuit, Northern Morris Associated Cinemas — named after an old-time exhibitor, Southan Morris, and run with his wife, Judy — consisted of the two-screen Picture House at Keighley, the three-screen Royalty at Bowness-on-Windermere, the single screens Plaza Skipton and Rex Elland, and the twin-screen Regal Lancaster which he ran very profitably during the long delay in opening a multiplex there.

When I called in at the Cottage Road Cinema on a recent Sunday, Charles Morris himself greeted me in the absence of the manager on holiday. It was busy showing *Pirates of the Caribbean 2* and I was twice abandoned with apologies while Morris dived behind the counter at the back of the foyer to boost sales to a flood of incoming patrons and then strapped on an ice-cream tray to stand besides the screen.

I ventured the thought that most cinema heads wouldn't dirty their hands in this way. "I carry on as I started," replied Morris. "That's how I started at Elland 18 years ago in October, so I've come of age as a cinema proprietor. I still run Elland every Tuesday and I

always go out with my ice cream tray. I was at Bowness last night and I've just been over to Keighley, mainly to deliver something. They were on a changeover, so I was picking up rubbish in the auditorium and then selling tickets for a while to let other people get on with other things. I lead by example.

"I once vowed that I would never have another single screen cinema and this is it," he said of his acquisition of the Cottage Road. "It was going to close on Thursday 28 July, which is my birthday — so my birthday present last year was taking over this cinema.

"We agreed a lease whereby, if things didn't work out, I could get out tolerably unscathed. We were given some figures which didn't present too good a picture, quite honestly, but not perhaps as bad a picture as was being painted. We thought, Let's give it a go, see if we can apply some of the formulae that have worked at our other cinemas. We agreed a deal on the Wednesday night; all Thursday I spent fielding calls from the press, TV and radio; and Friday morning we came over, signed the lease, and opened the doors at lunchtime to a very busy house with *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. I was very lucky there. I had been in discussion with the distributors about the possibility of taking it over and they said, Well, as long as you tell us on Wednesday afternoon that you want the print, we'll be able to supply it.

"I think certain of us in the independent sector, who worked from the bottom up, know how to run these cinemas economically. Certain operators don't have the know-how to run it on the minimum of staff." The Cottage Road is run by a manager who

also handles the projection. As Morris says, "In a single screen you've got to — once the film's running, there's nothing for the operator to do."

The cinema is a challenge. It is located down a side street and no longer has a car park of its own — and then there is the lack of flexibility with just one screen. I was interested in what changes Morris had instituted.

"Certainly the newspaper advertising wasn't to my style. I thought we could do a lot better on the advertising generally, which I think we have — not a terribly big advert compared to our multiplex colleagues but a more regular, more helpful advert, at least when the paper gets it right. And we've got a website which is more accessible than the previous one was and I also resolved that we'd book a bit more adventurously, which I can't say I've entirely achieved yet but I've made a few inroads into the normal routine programming.

"It is a problem with a single screen playing first run. There are new releases coming out every week so you miss next week's release because you've got to take new films for a fortnight at least, so the following week's release you either don't show it or you have to show it off release when you've got a quieter patch.

"There is quite an upmarket audience in the immediate locality — a very supportive audience. They were outraged at the possibility of the place closing, having recently lost the Lounge. Although you do get people who clamour round to save a cinema and disappear as soon as it's been rescued, they have kept on supporting us here.

"The campus of Leeds Metropolitan University is just

across the road and there are some very studenty pubs nearby as well — that helps. We try to cater for students in term time and we're getting ourselves known in the university.

"We ran *Ballets Russes* for a week — not as successfully as I would have liked but it did coincide with the week the newspaper left the advert out. I want to go further with foreign language films. We had *Bombón El Perro* and that did quite well for us. We co-operated with the Leeds Film Festival and showed *Pavee Lackeen*, which wasn't a foreign language film, and that did quite well too — as much to do with our publicity as the festival's publicity."

Arthouse films can be programmed on Thursday afternoon and/or evening. Morris observes, "It's a slightly different Thursday audience than we have at Elland, for instance — a slightly more intelligent edge around here — and you can show more demanding films for your Thursday afternoon shows than you can elsewhere."

Although, with 436 seats, it has the largest auditorium on his circuit, Morris has no plans to subdivide it or make major alterations. "We might re-seat it, the back portion anyway. I have provisioned some seats that I can put in, but it's finding time to do it. I do things like that myself, get a gang of people around me from the other cinemas, but Leeds is so far out from the other places I operate. The capacity can be a real advantage when you get films like *Harry Potter* or *Pirates of the Caribbean* — you can advertise that admission is virtually guaranteed and be confident that that's the case and people will then come because they know they can get in."

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