

July 1918...

In July 1918, Brandon saw the unveiling of a ground-breaking building, one like no other before it. However, before I take you to there, we must first go back to January 1914. Here, in a simple meeting room, Frederick Gentle, local councillor and butcher, stands before an audience lecturing about Captain Amundsen's expedition to the South Pole. Mr Gentle is a fantastic orator, so the audience hangs on his every word, but it helps that the temperature in this room is barely above freezing, so people are virtually experiencing the harsh conditions for themselves! To support the story, images are projected onto a wall, each one giving the audience a visual glimpse into the narrative. On this occasion it is not Mr Gentle we concern ourselves with, but instead I direct your attention to the young man sat behind the gas projector. Hidden behind the bright light, almost insignificant to the evening's proceedings, is a man whose passion for projecting images will see him open Brandon's first cinema.

It is now the afternoon of Tuesday 9th July, 1918. Stanley Lingwood has every reason to enjoy this afternoon. Despite surviving the horrendous slaughter at the Somme, he was so severely wounded in a later battle that he was discharged from the army on a disability pension. This money, and no doubt some inheritance from his late-father, Palmer Lingwood, who died last September, has allowed him to purchase a wooden cinema from Oswestry, in Shropshire. The cinema is now sited on a plot between his home, at Avenue House, and the Flowerpot pub. Oh, and the building has a name ... the 'Electric Picture House'.

Stanley is not the first to show a moving picture in town. Travelling companies have for years presented 'movies', usually stopping at the Paget Hall to do so. The long queues demonstrated Brandon's appetite for this new type of entertainment, so Stanley knows his cinema will be successful. The seating is nothing special, just benches, but there is enough room to accommodate up to five-hundred. There are precautions though, cramming people into a wooden building and using ultra hot projection equipment is a recipe for disaster, so the projection room has been built from brick.

Many of the town's dignitaries have been invited to the grand opening, which Stanley hopes will raise valuable funds for the Red Cross Society, whose nurses cared for him after he was wounded. Lieutenant-Colonel Hamilton, of Brandon House, proclaims that Stanley is, "*one of the heroes who has done his bit for his country.*" It is certain that Stanley has also "done his bit" for Brandon.

Stanley does not know it now, but his cinema will go on to become a hub of community life, used by many local groups, including a drama group called 'Brighter Brandon'. However the rapid advance of cinematic technology soon left Stanley's cinema behind and audiences drifted away. Stanley's equipment became temperamental and his attempts to apologise for its breakdown only met with a barrage of orange peel thrown at him by disgruntled audiences. The sight of staff squirting insecticide before a show reinforced the view it had become a "flea pit". In the 1930s, Stanley's health deteriorated and he sold the building. The new owner had ambitious plans for a modern cinema and I am sure it was no coincidence the wooden building burnt down early one morning in 1934. Despite all this, no one can take away the fact that Stanley pioneered cinema in Brandon.