

Richmond Film Society (RFS) in the Context of Film Offerings in Richmond and Twickenham and Film Technology Evolution

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Introduction - Historical Evolution of Cinema

Historically the cinematic history of Richmond and Twickenham can be divided into the silent film period, sound period and the studio/multiplex period. The silent movie bioscope days were the days were there were several small c. 100-200 seat venues. Then with sound the much larger several hundred to thousand seat picture houses were built. Then lastly there was the evolution to smaller venues by: (i) the division of the remaining picture houses into smaller screens, (ii) the building of purpose-built multiplexes and finally, (iii) new small capacity venues.

A table listing all the cinemas that have operated or still operate in our area is supplied as the **Appendix** to this document.

An Historic Review of Local Cinemas

The history of cinema in the UK started with the bioscope silent film days as peripatetic fairground attractions from the mid-1890s and as these public entertainment venues grew in popularity, various types of buildings, such as shops were converted into early cinemas venues to meet the ever-growing demand. However, after the introduction of the 1909 regulations set out in the Cinematograph Act, the majority of the converted cinemas were lost for failing to meet the acts' minimum requirements – probably the fate of Twickenham's Picture Palace, one of the first in our area opened in 1910.

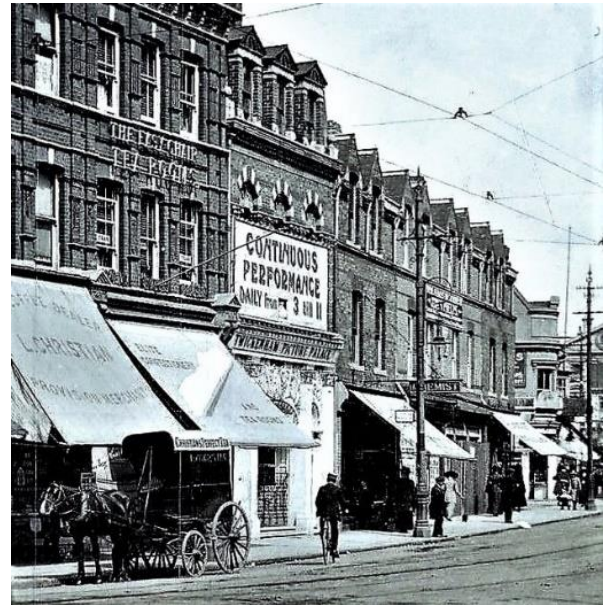


Figure 1 Twickenham Picture Palace (courtesy of Ken Roe & Mike Blakemore)



Figure 2 Twickenham Picture Palace site today

The first purpose-built cinemas were often constructed with flamboyant exteriors, often repeating the word ‘electric’ in their names to remind the public of the modern use of this novel energy; a local example was the Castle Electric Cinema (1910) in Richmond. These early cinema venues were often cramped, with minimal toilet facilities and hence were known as ‘fleapits’, unless they were lucky enough to have been enlarged or rebuilt.

So fixed location cinemas evolved in the UK from around 1910. They sprang up all over the country due to the popularity of the new form of entertainment and most towns had several. Our catchment area of Richmond and Twickenham was no different. There were ten: 6 in Richmond, 1 in Sheen and 3 in Twickenham.

A number closed in 1914 as their staff were called up to fight in the First World War and never reopened (in Richmond this was the fate of Castle Electric Cinema and in Twickenham the Twickenham Picture Palace).

A couple in Richmond continued on into the 1920s, the Empire and the Queen's which were either side of the clock tower, which still exists at the end of Sheen Road. Hence their 1920s? names Clock Cinema No1 and Clock Cinema No2 respectively.



Figure 3 Dome Buildings today, originally the Richmond Empire



Figure 4 The Richmond Community Centre site of the Queen's Cinema redeveloped into today's Waitrose

Those remaining in business to 1930 were then faced with major cost of an upgrade to sound as talkies arrived (Sound reached Britain in September 1928 with the part-talkie *The Jazz Singer*), a cost they could not afford. In Richmond this was the fate of The Talbot Picture Theatre (see later) and in Twickenham both the Gaiety and the Lyric Picture House).

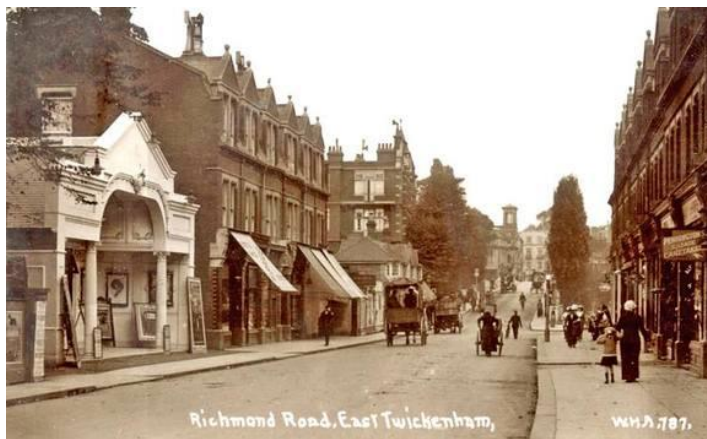


Figure 5 Twickenham Gaiety (courtesy Roger Wyer) and the same building today



Figure 6 Twickenham Lyric Place (courtesy of the BFI) and the same building today

Others were knocked down and rebuilt as the big picture palaces we can all remember from our childhood, in our area the Richmond Royalty Kinema replaced the New Royalty Kinema and Sheen Odeon replaced the Picturedrome.



Figure 7 Richmond Royalty Kinema in its Gaumont days (courtesy of Roger Wyrer) and today's preserved façade



Figure 8 Sheen Odeon (1956) (courtesy of Mike Blakemore) and the site today

In the early days Cinema was not the term used but Kinema was, this continued until 1940s when Kinema was replaced. The word originates from the co joining of *kinumai*, the Greek to move with *grapho* write, inscribe hence giving us cinematograph (machines that could write in motion) the initial letter becoming softened and so became cinematography the respective shortening being kinema that became cinema (NB in Europe the K persists in many languages with cinemas and magazines using the word Kino).

Of note in our area was the Kinema chain run by Joseph Mears all with a location prefix – Richmond, Sheen, Kensington & Hammersmith plus a second one in Richmond, the Royalty Kinema, so called to differentiate it from The Richmond Kinema [Joseph Mears was a Hammersmith born entrepreneur who not only owned a cinema chain but also founded Chelsea football club and ran ferries and tourist boats on the Thames – based on Eel Pie Island; one of which was the infamous *Marchioness* that tragically sank in 1989 upon collision with the Bowbelle, with the loss of 53 lives. Mears was mayor of Richmond from 1931 to 1932]. In 1940, with the threat of the German's invading using parachute troops, they were renamed with location part of their names removed, to prevent the invaders from easily knowing where they might be:

Richmond Kinema became Premier Cinema

Sheen Kinema became Empire Cinema

Going back in time to the origins of the Richmond Odeon historically opposite the end of Richmond Bridge and slightly left stood The Talbot Hotel, a well-established inn. In 1911 it was replaced by The Talbot Picture Theatre which ran until 1930 when it was partially demolished, and part incorporated into The Richmond Kinema which Joseph Mears built on its site.



Figure 9 Richmond Bridge and the Talbot Hotel



Figure 10 Talbot Picture House (courtesy of Roger Wyer) and Richmond Odeon today

I'm sure most of you have been to Richmond Odeon where it still has some of the features of Mears's building. The entrance foyer plasterwork depicts all the various trades of the people the Mears employed. Screen 1 still has 17th century Spanish courtyard features that include ornate grillwork, Spanish tiles, Moorish windows, even stone and plaster oranges and doves.

When Joseph Mears died in 1935, his circuit was then bought by Oscar Deutsch's Odeon Theatres Ltd. chain on 3rd January 1944. Where upon the Premier Cinema, in May 1944, was re-named Odeon. In turn the Odeon chain merged with Gaumont British Theatres chain and became part of the Rank Organisation. Hence Rank thought they had too many cinemas in Richmond. So when, in the late 1970s, it was mooted that the Richmond Gaumont would close **RFS** was very active in pressing the council in preserving film showing in Richmond. We would like to think we influenced the creation of the covenant with the Richmond Riverside developers that they had to preserve a cinema on the site. Hence in 1987 the Richmond Filmhouse was born. In 2009, the year after it had become the Curzon, **RFS** investigated moving there. We met the people there who were quite keen to have us in on a Tuesday night, a night they had difficulty in getting more than 20 in. We went quite a long way in progressing this, as I say with strong support from the local staff. Sadly, we were given the brush off by the chain's management, as they were contracted by the distributors to have a specified number of film screenings and if we took a slot these terms would be violated.

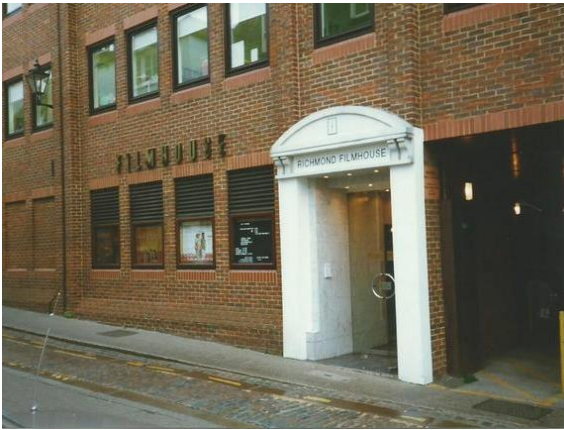


Figure 11 Richmond Filmhouse (1999) (courtesy of David Simpson) and today's rebranded Richmond Curzon

Sadly, the period from 1956 to 1980, the era of mass cinema going ended due to the success of TV, which in turn led to the closure and demolition of the previously mentioned Richmond Gaumont and also in Richmond the ABC. Elsewhere locally we lost Odeons in Twickenham, Whitton, Sheen and Isleworth along with both the Gaumont and Regal in Twickenham and the ABC Savoy in Teddington [NB In February in 1958 ABC closed the Savoy cinema in protest at Entertainments Duty Tax until the tax was abandoned in May later that year].



Figure 12 Richmond ABC (courtesy of Old Photographs) and the site today



Figure 13 Twickenham Luxor (courtesy of Mike Blakemore) on the day it became the Odeon and in its Odeon days (courtesy of Len Gazzard)



Figure 14 Twickenham Odeon site today



Figure 15 Whitton Ritz (courtesy of Mike Blakemore) and its last days as an Odeon (courtesy of Len Gazzard)



Figure 16 Whitton Odeon site today



Figure 17 Isleworth Odeon (courtesy of Granola) and the same building today



Figure 18 Twickenham Kinema (courtesy of Ken Roe) and renamed Queen's Cinema (courtesy of Mike Blakemore) prior to it becoming Twickenham Gaumont.



Figure 19 Twickenham Gaumont site today



Figure 20 Twickenham's Regal Cinema (courtesy of Ken Roe) and the site today



Figure 21 Teddington's Savoy and you can just notice to its immediate left the adjacent Elmfield Picture Hall both redeveloped in to the ABC Savoy Super Cinema as in the righthand photo (both photos courtesy of Mike Blakemore).



Figure 22 The Super Savoy site today

In order for the original Richmond Odeon to survive it was split into three screens in 1972. Cinema going then picked up in the late 1980s. So the Odeon group invested in 1992 in its Odeon Studio complex of four small screens (with an average seating capacity of 75); by converting the former billiard hall on this site.



Figure 23 Richmond's Odeon Studios

Our immediate RFS catchment area though has not benefited from the building of any modern purpose-built multiplex cinemas. The nearest is Cineworld in Feltham, which opened in 1997; it has 14 screens with a total of 2,432 seats.

RFS in the Borough of Richmond upon Thames

I refer back now to the previously mentioned Queen's cinema in Richmond, which closed in 1921. Well this was not the end of its story as a film showing venue. The building was originally called the Queen's Hall and was built in 1900 as a Freemason's Club. In 1911, it was taken over by the Wright Brothers (not the flying men) and they began screening films there under the name the Pictorial Hall. What followed were many more short-lived names during its cinematic life: Lounge Theatre de Luxe; New Pavilion Cinema; Gaiety; Scala Kinemacolour, Clock Cinema No. 2; Grand; and ultimately Queen's, which on its 1921 closure was converted into a billiards hall. Subsequently in 1944, it was then converted into the **Richmond Community Centre**.



Figure 24 Richmond Community Centre 1980, courtesy of the Richmond and Twickenham Times

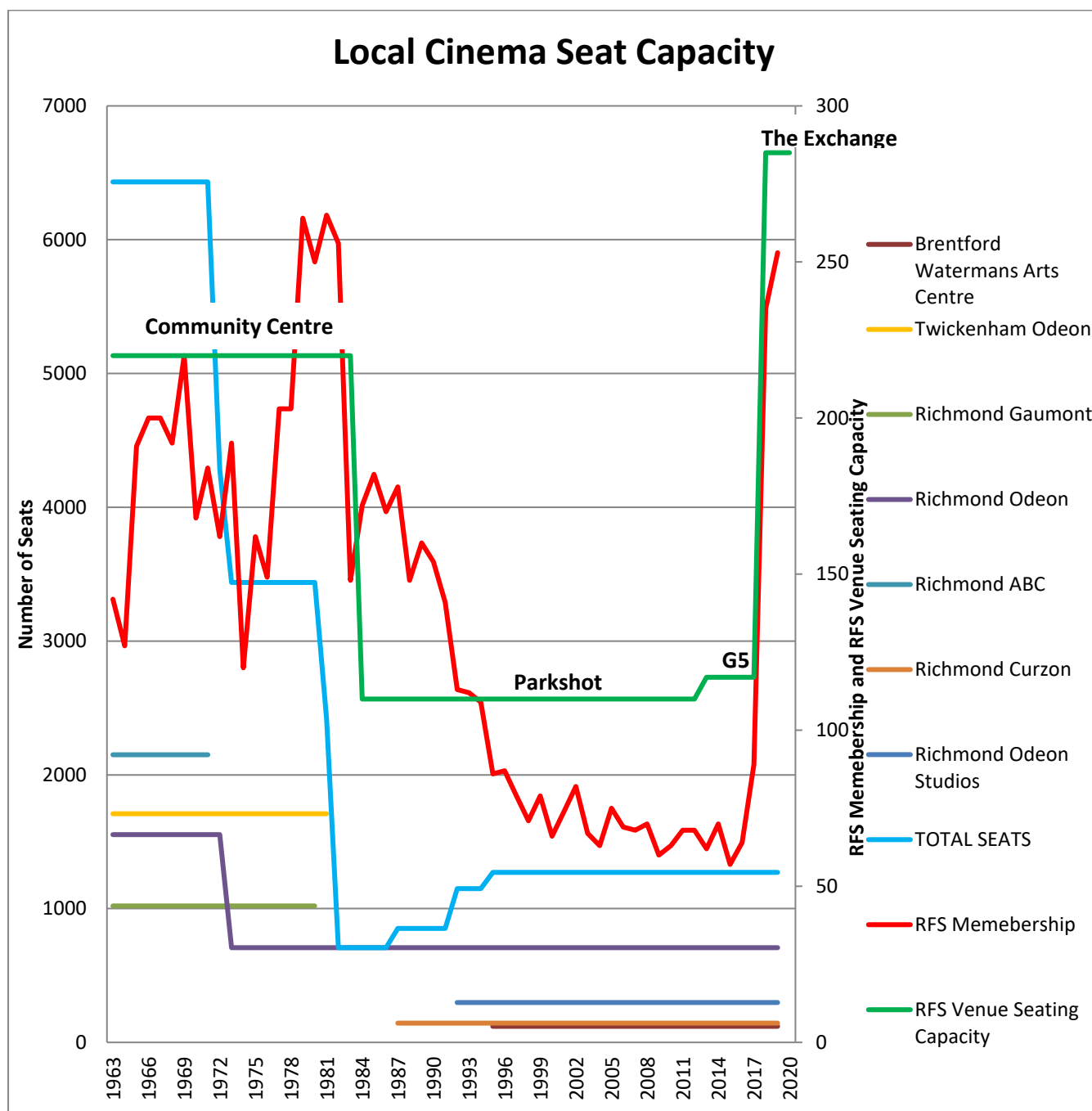
Nationally the film society movement took off from the late 1940s. One of these early film societies was in Richmond, called the **Richmond Film Group**, using **Richmond Community Centre** for occasional screenings in the 1940s and 1950s. That film society incarnation then ceased. In 1963, coincidentally, the present **Richmond Film Society** started its life in the same **Richmond Community Centre**. **RFS** continued using this premises year on year until 1984 when we had to leave because of the Waitrose redevelopment. When we were using the space there was no fixed seating, so we had to put out chairs pre each show. In this mode **RFS** had a capacity of 220 seats.

After the demise of **Richmond Community Centre**, the Film Society moved location to the Studio Theatre (110 seats) of **Richmond Adult and Community College** in **Parkshot**, Richmond. Then when that in turn was knocked down for redevelopment, we moved in 2012 to **Room G5** (seating capacity 117 seats) of **St Mary's University Strawberry Hill**, Twickenham. **RFS** has over the last 3 years gone from strength to strength. So we had to find new premises to cope with our increased audience numbers.

Therefore, at the start of 2018, we moved to newly built community premises (built by the site developers under a covenant from the council) **The Exchange**, 75 London Road, Twickenham, TW1 1BE, which opened in October 2017. **The Exchange** is built on the site of the Twickenham's old Post Office Sorting Office, it has 1 screen and 285 seats. Not only do we show our alternate Tuesday films here but **The Exchange** also puts on its own screenings and it's the home of **Twickenham Cinema Club**.

Various seating capacity statistics through time are graphed below:

Various seating capacity statistics through time are graphed below:



The graph addresses the active cinemas in our catchment area during the life of **RFS** from its start in 1963 through to present. The individual active cinemas are listed in the legend on the right with individual horizontal lines representing their capacity; values can be read off the left axis. The righthand ends of these lines indicate the year when that cinema ceased screening, if they have since closed. The turquoise line is the total seating capacity by year of the active venues which was 6,432 in 1963 falling off to as low as 708 from 1982 through to 1986, with an increase to 852 with the addition of the Richmond Picturehouse/Curzon. Numbers increased again with the 1992 opening of

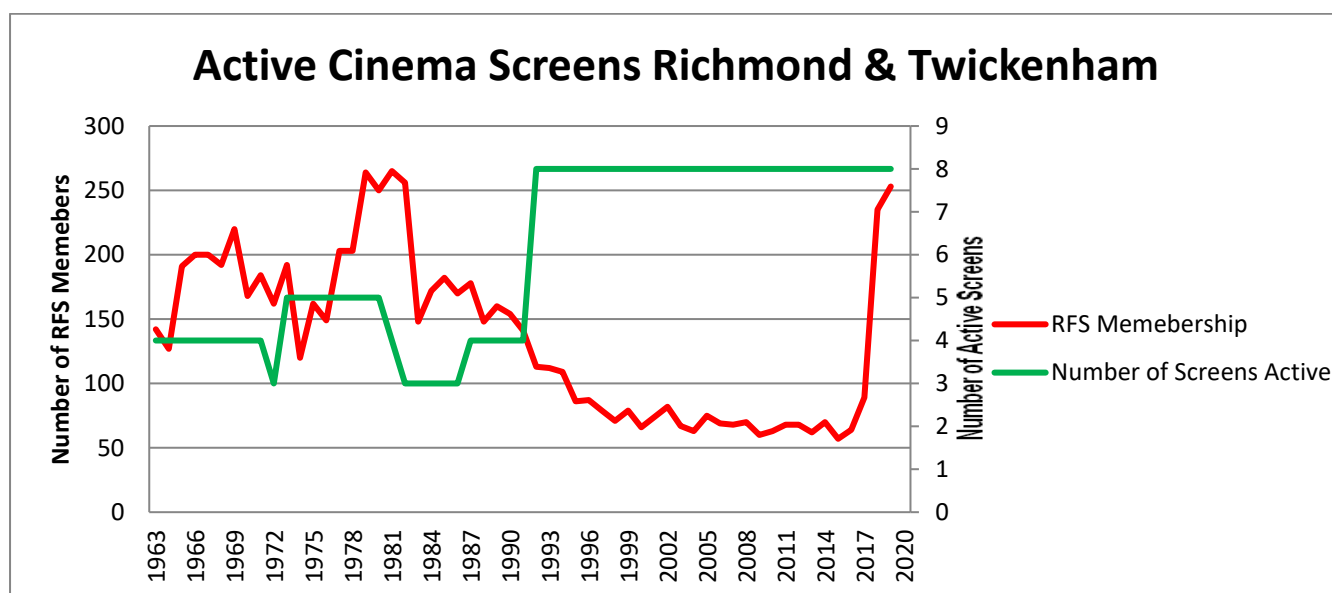
the four Odeon Studios to 1,150, this Richmond figure continues through to present. In addition, the not quite so local Waterman's Arts Center opened in 1995 and with its capacity included we get to 1,270.

The other two continuous lines, green and red, whose values can be read off the right-hand axis, plot respectively the seating capacity of the venues used by **RFS** in its different locations (each venue is labelled) and the membership number of the society.

It's interesting that **RFS** has expertly managed its membership to reflect the seating capacity available. Notice for our first eight years in **Parkshot** we were running with an average membership of 163, whereas the venue could only accommodate 110! Present day analyses of attendances indicate that we rarely get more than 60% of the membership attending. In fact, the largest membership over these eight **Parkshot** years was 182 and 60% of this figure works out to be 109 – excellent management or what! Look too to the years from 1995 to 2017 here we see membership dropping to as low as 57 as recently as 2015, with an average membership of 70, well below our venue seating capacity of 110. In fact, in 2003, with the year on year run of these low membership numbers, we were very concerned as to the ongoing viability of **RFS**. Thankfully we turned a corner in 2016 and as indicated membership has taken off and is presently (2019) 253. In fact, in 2018 we had to take the decision to close membership at 235; for 2019 membership was also closed but we have increased the cap to 253. A return to more than the number of members we had during most of our years at the **Richmond Community Centre**.

Active Cinema Screens Throughout the Time of RFS' Existence

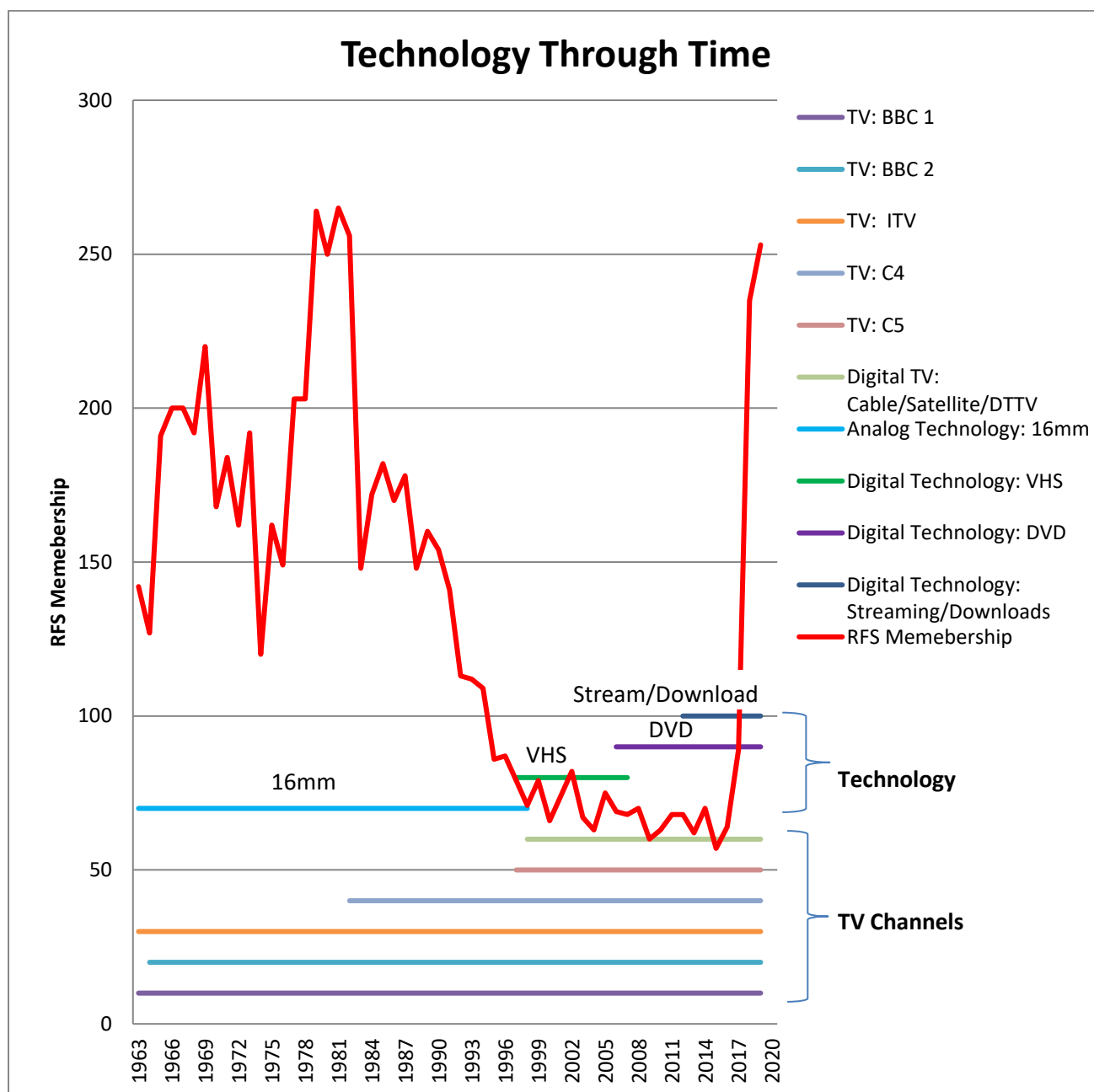
Sympathetic to the seating capacity statistics through time are the number of active screens in our area, these are graphed below:



The green line with its axis on the right shows the number of active screens plotted against the red line, our membership number whose values are indicated on the left axis. This clearly indicates that when there were few active commercial screens (3 to 5) 1963 to 1992 our membership was highest (not really a surprise) and when the number of screens increased to 8 our membership fell-off, until 2017. The fall-off period can be explained by the advent of the ease of home viewing.

Technology Evolution Throughout the Time of RFS' Existence

Graphed below the change in technology and rise in TV stations through time against **RFS** membership:



This graph clearly shows that with the development of home film watching technologies from the late 1990s along with the proliferation of TV stations our membership fell off, once more not really a surprise.

First there was the development of home film viewing from physical media initially VHS (and Betamax), this was then superseded by DVD. These developments too impacted **RFS**. At the start of **RFS**' life in 1963 16mm film was used as the source medium for projection, which continued to be the supplied medium until the late 1990s when 16mm film (a few cans per film) was replaced by VHS tape (1 tape per film). VHS tape lasted for the standard seven to ten years that any digital

technology lasts for before being superseded, in this case it was superseded by DVDs (1 disc per film). In the late 2000s RFS started using DVDs, which is the source medium we are still using today (2019). The companion document on the history of **RFS** goes into this media evolution in more detail.

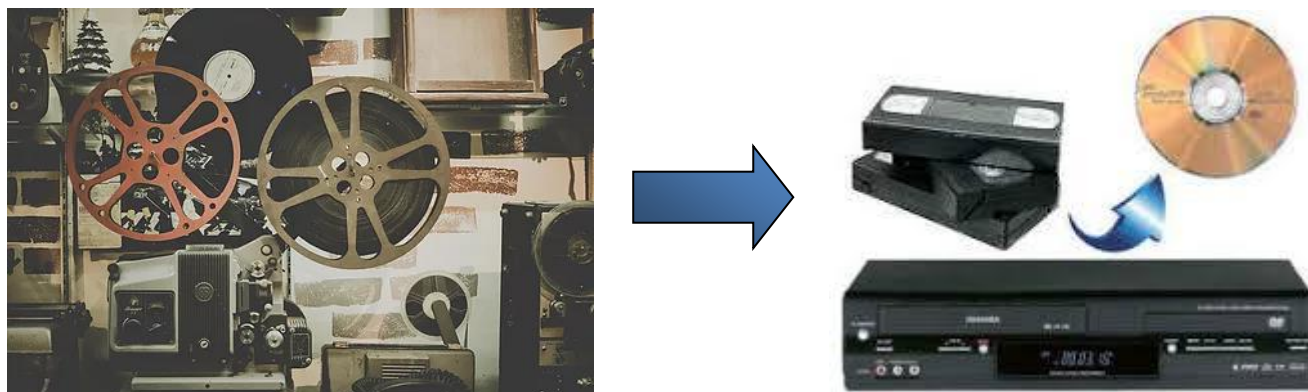


Figure 25 Film media evolution: 16mm film to VHS tape to DVD disc

Digital movie streaming evolved in parallel with the media evolution just outlined as digital television and worldwide web technology evolved. The first digital TV services were developed in the early-1990s. Coming to the UK in 1994 as local cable provided services. By the mid-1990s this had evolved into in the home cable video-on-demand access services but did not really take off until 1998 and includes movies, which continues to today. Contemporaneously around 1998 TV satellite broadcasting with similar video-on-demand film access services arrived as did digital terrestrial television (**Freeview**). Internet technology was also evolving at the same time with the first download streaming/functionality arriving in 2005-2007 with **You-Tube** but this was only for movies of less than ten minutes duration, since at this time the way one accessed the internet was by dial-up modem links and this did not have the bandwidth to allow for longer movie streaming. It was not until 2007 with the development of widely accessible broadband that streaming and downloading of movies became a viable possibility, not really taking off until 2012 and only becoming very common from 2016 (e.g. **Netflix** & **Amazon Prime** service offerings).

To date **Richmond Film Society** has not pursued internet delivery of the films it screens. Live streaming with the instability of network connections is unlikely to ever be considered as viable. The digital download of films, pre their screening followed by their playing back as a method of screening movies to its audiences though does need to be considered as an option by **RFS** in the near future. Especially as we are finding, from 2018, some of the movies we want to include in our season's selection are only available via streaming or download services and not available on physical media (i.e. DVD, etc.).

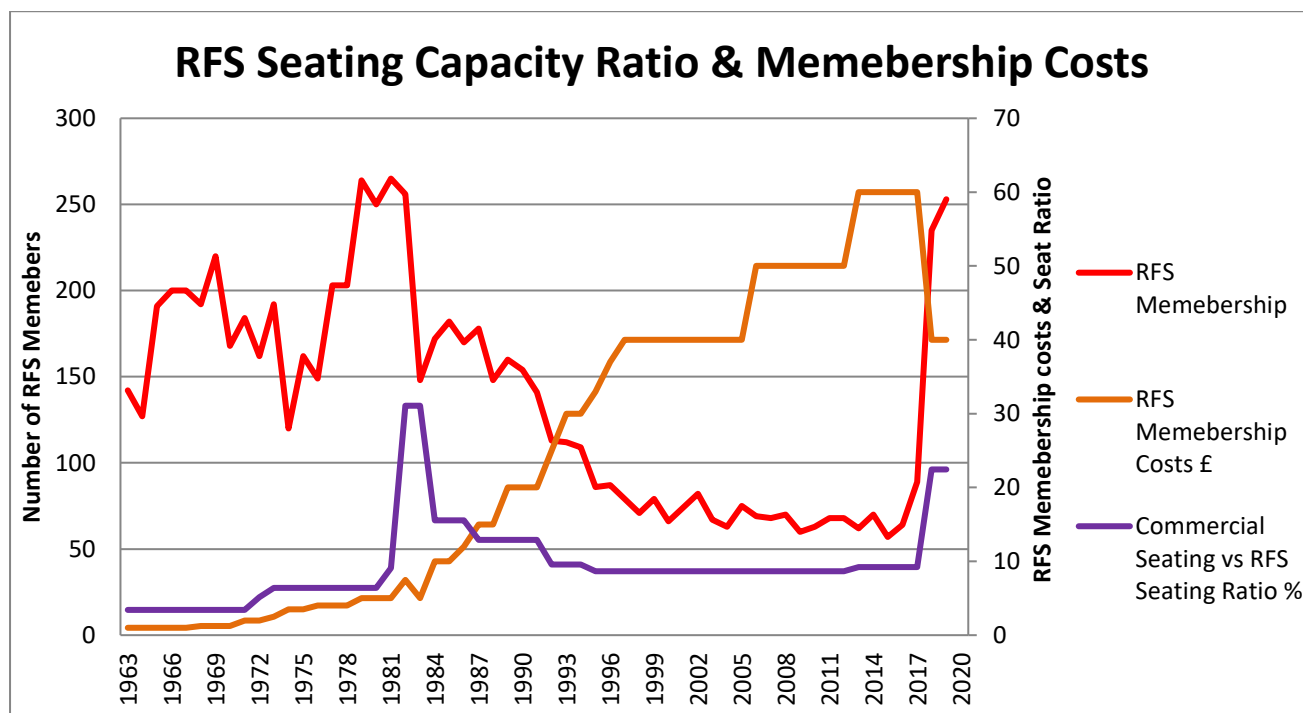
RFS and Cinema Seat Costs

The fall in our membership resulting from home movie viewing a trend was only reversed by our change in venue from 2018. Certainly, factors here must be the easy public transport accessibility of The Exchange being on-top-of Twickenham station and our reduced subscription costs equating to £2.30 a film.

For comparison the table below shows the mid-2018 cinema ticket price for cinemas in our area:

Cinema	Number of Screens	Distance from RFS Venue (miles)	Ticket Cost 11/05/2018 (£)
Odeon, Richmond upon Thames	7	2	14.75
Odeon, Kingston upon Thames	15	4.5	15.25
Curzon, Richmond	1	2	16.00
Watermans, Brentford	1	3.5	10.00
Barnes, Olympic Studios	1	5	16.00
Cineworld, Feltham	11	5	13.00

The last graph below plots the number of seats **RFS** has on its screening nights against the total number in our catchment area as a percentage ratio of the total seating capacity of our catchment area – purple line with the percentage on the right axis. i.e. since 2018, on our film nights, we account for 22 percent of the available film viewing seating capacity in the area! Throughout most of our existence this was no more than 10% (except for the years between 1981 and 1984, where the only cinema in the borough was the 3 screen split Richmond Odeon). The orange membership line graphs our membership fee through time in £ (again read off the right axis) clearly demonstrating the fact that mentioned above that low costs equal more members.



Sources

BFI

Richmond Reference Library

<http://cinematreasures.org/>

Richmond & Twickenham Times

Appendix: Local Cinemas - Dates of Operation, Seating Capacity, Name Evolution & Locations

Location	Name @ Closure or Present Cinema Name	Compound name	Date Opened	Date Closed	Seating Capacity	Cinema active contemporaneously w RFS y=yes n=no	Original and Subsequent Names w year that name adopted	Address	Does the Building Exist? What's There Now
Brentford	Watermans Arts Centre	Brentford Watermans Arts Centre	1995?		120	y		40 High Street, Brentford, TW8 0DS	active today
Isleworth	Odeon	Isleworth Odeon	1935	1957	1408	n		484 London Road, Isleworth, TW7 4DH	Building Exists: Radio station on its site
Richmond	Empire Cinema	Richmond Empire Cinema	1909	1923	200?	n	The Palais; 19?? The Dome; 19?? Palace Cinema; 19?? Clock Cinema No. 1; 1921 The Empire Cinema	3-4 Dome Buildings, The Square, TW9 1DT	Building Exists: Shop Lululemon Athletica on its site
Richmond	Castle Electric Cinema	Richmond Castle Electric Cinema	1910	1914	200?	n		Whittaker Avenue, TW9 1TP	Demolished: Part of Richmond Riverside Development
Richmond	Theatre	Richmond Theatre	1910	1914	840	n	Dates are years for which it held a cinema licence	The Green, TW9 1QJ	active today as theatre only
Richmond	Queen's Cinema	Richmond Queen's Cinema	1911	1921	200?	n	Pictorial Hall; 19?? Lounge Theatre de Luxe; 19?? New Pavilion Cinema; 19?? Gaiety; 19?? Scala Kinemacolour, 19?? Clock Cinema No. 2; 19?? Grand; 19?? Queen's	10 Sheen Road, TW9 1AE	Demolished: Waitrose on its site [Became the Community Centre, the home of RFS from 1963 to 1984]
Richmond	Talbot Picture Theatre	Richmond Talbot Picture Theatre	1911	1930	572	n		38 Hill Street, TW9 1TW	Demolished: Partly incorporated into Odeon and shops to left of Odeon
Richmond	Gaumont	Richmond Gaumont	1914	1980	1020	y	New Royalty Kinema; 1929 Royalty Kinema; 1949 Gaumont	5 Hill Street/Heron Square, TW9 1SX	Demolished: Façade preserved - part of Richmond Riverside Development
Richmond	Odeon	Richmond Odeon	1930	1972	1533	y	Richmond Kinema; 1940 Premier Cinema; 1944 Odeon	72 Hill Street, TW9 1TW	Reordered: Split into Screens 1 to 3 in 1972
Richmond	ABC	Richmond ABC	1938	1971	2150	y	Ritz Cinema; 1961 ABC	23 Sheen Road, TW9 1BN	Demolished: Spencer House offices, opposite Waitrose, on its site
Richmond	Odeon 1	Richmond Odeon 1	1972		372	y		72 Hill Street, TW9 1TW	active today
Richmond	Odeon 2	Richmond Odeon 2	1972		168	y		72 Hill Street, TW9 1TW	active today
Richmond	Odeon 3	Richmond Odeon 3	1972		168	y		72 Hill Street, TW9 1TW	active today
Richmond	Curzon	Richmond Curzon	1987		144	y	Richmond Filmhouse; 2008 Curzon	3 Water Lane, TW9 1TJ	active today
Richmond	Odeon Studio 4	Richmond Odeon Studio 4	1992		69	y		6 Red Lion Street, TW9 6RN	active today
Richmond	Odeon Studio 5	Richmond Odeon Studio 5	1992		72	y		6 Red Lion Street, TW9 6RN	active today
Richmond	Odeon Studio 6	Richmond Odeon Studio 6	1992		69	y		6 Red Lion Street, TW9 6RN	active today
Richmond	Odeon Studio 7	Richmond Odeon Studio 7	1992		88	y		6 Red Lion Street, TW9 6RN	active today
Sheen	Odeon	Sheen Odeon	1910	1961	1448	n	Picturedrome (demolished 1929); 1930 rebuilt as Sheen Kinema; 1940 Empire; 1954 Odeon	143 Sheen Lane, London, SW14 8LR	Demolished: Parkway House offices on Richmond Park side of Sheen centre on its site
Teddington	ABC Savoy	Teddington ABC Savoy	1912	1937	750	n	Picture House (1912-1929 silent) which was in 1930 fitted for sound and renamed Savoy Cinema; 1935 ABC Savoy	7 High Street, Teddington, TW11 8EE	Demolished: Rebuilt as part of New ABC Savoy Super Cinema
Teddington	Elmfield Picture Hall	Teddington Elmfield Picture Hall	1912	1933	250?	n	Elmfield Picture Hall to early 1930s;	7 High Street, Teddington, TW11 8EE	Demolished: Rebuilt as part of New ABC Savoy Super Cinema
Teddington	New ABC Savoy Super Cinema	Teddington New ABC Savoy Super Cinema	1937	1960	1744	n	The New Savoy Super Cinema was built on the site of two adjacent cinemas: ABC Savoy & Elmfield Picture Hall	7 High Street, Teddington, TW11 8EE	Demolished: Harlequin House offices, located at the corner of Teddington High Street and Elmfield Avenue on its site
Twickenham	Picture Palace	Twickenham Picture Palace	1910	1912	250	n		46 King Street, TW1 3SH	Building Exists: Oxfam store on its site
Twickenham	Lyric Picture House	Twickenham Lyric Picture House	1911	1930	200?	n	The Lyric Palace; 1920? Lyric Picture House	1 Richmond Road, TW1 3BZ	Building Exists: Eel Pie Museum
Twickenham	Gaiety	Twickenham Gaiety	1912	1931	150?	n	The Grand Picture Theatre; 1913 Gaiety Electric Playhouse; 1916 Albert Cinema; 1920? Gaiety	419 Richmond Road, TW1 2EF	Building Exists: Offices on right just after Richmond Bridge
Twickenham	Gaumont	Twickenham Gaumont	1928	1956	1141	n	Twickenham Kinema; 1940 Queens Cinema; 1950 Gaumont	3-11 Richmond Road, TW1 3AB	Demolished: Oak Lane Shell petrol station on its site
Twickenham	Odeon	Twickenham Odeon	1929	1981	1709	y	Luxor Picture Theatre; 1946 Odeon	3 Cross Deep, TW1 4QJ	Demolished: Rylieghs snooker club and flats on its site
Twickenham	Regal	Twickenham Regal	1939	1960	1760	n		70 London Road, TW1 3QS	Demolished: Regal House offices on its site
Whitton	Odeon	Whitton Odeon	1937	1961	1744	n	Ritz Cinema; 1945 Odeon	22 High Street, Whitton, TW2 7LT	Demolished: Shops/flats, opposite The Admiral Nelson, on its site
	Key								
		Fleapits pre-WWI							
		Fleapits to sound era							
		Picture Houses to 1960 pre TV							
		Picture Houses to 1980 post TV							
		Modern Studios							