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## **Astor Theatre 1 Chapel Street (cnr Dandenong Road), St Kilda**

Horse stables, built by Thomas Alford in 1894 occupied this prominent site on the Dandenong Road until 1912 (or 1908), when Alford built the Diamond Picture Theatre. The outer wall of this theatre (and maybe even of the earlier stables) still forms the rear shell of the Astor. In 1913-14 the Diamond became the Theatre Rex. It closed in 1917.

In 1935, Alford sold the property to Frank O'Collins, who had set up Astor Theatres Pty Ltd. and demolition and rebuilding began in December 1935. It was a sign of confidence in post-Depression Melbourne or of the profits to be made in desperate times from escapism, as there were then seven other theatres in St Kilda and Prahran. These included: the Broadway, 147 Ormond Road, Elwood (1919-60); the Empress, 217 Chapel Street, Prahran (1913-58, demolished); the Memorial (St Kilda Soldiers' & Sailors' Memorial Hall, (1927-57, **6**); the Palais (1927, **3**); the Royal, 30 Chapel Street, Windsor (1911-41); the Victory, cnr Carlisle & Barkly Streets (1921-74) and the Windsor, 174 Peel Street, Windsor (1936-62?).



The Astor, 2002

Earlier cinemas in St Kilda had been: the St Kilda Cinema (Bioscope) was first to open on 11 April 1911, on the site of the Banff Restaurant, 145 Fitzroy Street, with studio facilities; Casino Daylight Pictures (Comedy Theatre), Lower Esplanade, (1913-15, demolished); the Elite Biograph (later the Palais and the Barkly), cnr Barkly & Acland Streets (1912-1921, demolished); the Living Picture Gardens (Corso, Le Boulevard), Upper Esplanade (1909-1916, demolished); the Lyric, Alfred Square East (1911-25, demolished); the Mayfair (Earls Court), Upper Esplanade (1928-33, demolished); the Palais, Lower Esplanade (1913-26, demolished); the Picture Garden, Upper Esplanade (1908-24, demolished); Pictureland (Palais, Broadway), Alfred Square West, (1909-16, demolished) and the St Kilda, 125 Fitzroy Street, (1911-32, demolished).

The Astor was designed in 1935 by Ron Morton Taylor, in Jazz Moderne style. Earlier, Taylor had designed the Gardenvale Theatre in 1925, with Bohringer & Johnson, the Burnley in 1928, the Western (1928), and the State (now the Forum) with Bohringer & Johnson (but from sketches by the famous American designer, John Eberson) in 1929. Frank Thring (senior) operated his Eftee film production studio on the current Novotel site in Alfred Square in 1933.

The Astor was opened on 3 April, 1936 at a ceremony attended by the Mayor and Councillors of St Kilda and a large number of invited guests reported the *Argus* newspaper. It was a dramatic moment because, across Dandenong Road, the same evening, the

Windsor Theatre also was opened in a rival ceremony. One imagines the sky alive with sweeping kleiglits. The Windsor was designed by rival cinema architects H. Vivian Taylor, Soilleaux & Overend.

Despite its Moderne styling, the Astor is one of the last cinemas in Melbourne with traditional stalls and circle. After the economic depression of the 1930s, cheaper construction and maintenance were sought by owners. Cinemas were smaller, more intimate, but also with the stadium, or 'Continental' system of floor construction and sectional profile: a single tier auditorium with new seats steeply banked off the stalls floor, without centre aisles. This meant walls could be less structurally robust, not needing to support the cantilevered circle seating. Since seating was on the one level, the cost of cleaning, heating and ventilation was less.

Otherwise the Jazz Moderne style's clean relatively undecorated lines at the Astor (and the Windsor) are arguably the earliest in Melbourne. Later this was the style of other late 1930s cinemas: the Sun, Yarraville (1938); the Circle, Preston, (1938, demolished) the Planet, Preston (1939, demolished); the Rivoli, Camberwell (1940) and the Time, Balwyn (1941), for instance.

The Astor's geometric cream and chocolate brick façade includes an eight pointed star in relief, partly obscured by its neon sign with its 12 illuminated stars. This is the earliest surviving 'moving' neon sign in Victoria. Only the static Palais sign is earlier (1927, 3). On the Astor's interior, the cinema trade journal *Everyone's* boasted: 'good design, decoration and furnishings have been combined so that the theatre can truthfully be claimed to be the last word in theatre construction...' The interior is remarkably intact. Off the foyer with its terrazzo floor and stair is a confectionary and supper room (now closed). From the Dress Circle foyer, an oval light-well overlooks the foyer.



Plan of Astor Theatre, 1936

The auditorium sat 1,673 patrons (now 1,200). It has a stepped ceiling and opaline light fittings, with a shallow dome, and fine wrought steel chevron-patterned friezes. It has unusually spacious lounges for a suburban cinema. Amazingly, the 1929 Western Electric sound amplifier survives. There were alterations in 1937, 1944 and 1961, including removal of the ticket box from the centre of the foyer.

The Astor showed prestigious programmes, mainly of Paramount, MGM, and United Artists' pictures. This reputation enabled it to survive the arrival of television in 1956. Cinemascope, a new proscenium and technical improvements kept the cinema alive until 1967, when it was sold to Tanda Investments. In 1969 it became one of their chains of 12 Greek cinemas in Melbourne. The stage was enlarged for live performance (since the Astor was built for talkies, a live stage had not be considered necessary), reducing the stalls' capacity. Multicultural television reduced demand from the Greek community and the Astor closed in February 1982. It was only dark for six months however and in 17 September the present owner George Florence, a nephew of the Greek cinema chain, secured the lease, opening with the screening of the 1933 'masterpiece' *King Kong* on a double bill with '*The African Queen*'.

After 1985, audience numbers increased and the Astor's four-monthly repertory posters still graced many a Melbourne toilet door, next to the Leunig calendar. Lighting, screen and sound equipment were modernised in 1985 and the sound system was completely redeveloped. It was the principal venue for the Melbourne International Film Festival until 1995. Two years later the theatre was fully air conditioned and Dolby Digital sound installed. Now there is a new (its third) screen in a replica proscenium and new lenses for each of seven different types of screening ratio, suiting films from flickering silents to Cinemascope, and 70mm. The Astor has its own film distribution library called Chapel Distribution. The Astor recently obtained a liquor licence. It is the only repertory cinema surviving in Melbourne, one of very few independents.

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**Note:** A version of this chapter appeared in Fogarty, Peter. '*The Screening of St Kilda. A History of St Kilda's Cinemas*'. St Kilda Historical Society, St Kilda, 2004. Peter Fogarty gives 1967 as the date the Astor went Greek, not 1969.

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