

Redlynch & District Local History Society

Albany Ward Cinema Pioneer of the South West.

By Ruth Butler

Ruth Butler from the Chippenham History Centre presented our April talk; Albany Ward (right) was the pseudonym and later legalised name of Hannan Edward Bonner who was born in 1879 in London. He was educated in Christ's Hospital which was a charitable public boarding school for boys of parents with distressed means. Hannan became interested in the projection of pictures and learnt the art by first working for Birt Acres in 1896; he then moved a year later to Velograph which specialised in moving pictures and set up his own company in 1898. He became a travelling projectionist using fairs, and any suitable large building to entertain audiences with short films. Hannan adopted the name of Albany Ward in 1901 which was legalised in 1922.



Albany was a very astute business man and by 1914 had 29 theatres of his own which were conversions and later new build, operated his own printing business for posters etc, and a film company to produce and obtain films. The operation covered Wiltshire, Channel Islands, Oxford, Chipstow, Exeter, Somerset and Dorset with its first Headquarters in Weymouth, latterly Salisbury. This was the largest single such business at that time and when the films were not being shown, they were used as theatres and skating rinks. One such was in Castle Street beside Ivy Lane, and another the Picture House Theatre (left) became the old Salisbury Playhouse in Fisherton Street.



On the outbreak of the First World War, he presented himself to the local military authorities and offered to provide much needed entertainment to the men in the new camps which were springing up. His travelling projectionists using his own branded vans became a familiar sight. Albany was well known for his philanthropy, especially to the Red Cross, and on various occasions offered the whole night's takings to the charity. Toward the end of the War, Albany appears to have suffered a health issue which did not stop him becoming a Special Constable. In 1923-4 Albany sold his whole film and cinema business to what later became Gaumont although they operated under his name for a considerable period. Albany kept the printing business and successfully diversified into house building.

In 1899 Hannan had married an opera singer, Edith Robinson, and remarried in 1916 to Dorothy Hembrow, having four children who have been an important source of artefacts and information.

Our next talk is "Southampton 1610-1840" by Jake Simpson at Morgans Vale & Woodfalls Village hall at 7:30pm on Tuesday 7th May.