

# The Empress Ballroom.

The Empress Ballroom opened in in the middle of WW1 -1916 by the Atherton family and by all accounts was an immediate success so much so that only eight years later a second Ballroom was added 'The Palais de Dance '.Two events could be held on the same evening , or on nights of ' big occasions ' both would be used and caused a little confusion ,the balcony of the Empress had large double doors that lead to the ground floor of ' The Pali ' very disconcerting especially if you'd had a tipple ( or 3 ).

On the subject of bars ,the ballroom didn't have a licence to sell intoxicants, hence the Saturday dances or midweek affairs it was non alcoholic drinks only ; on Friday night dances an occasional licence would applied for on the grounds that the dance was for some particular firms /works-dance or parish dance , in truth it was a way of circumventing the licensing laws . I must confess that Friday night dances were my chosen ones, the atmosphere always seemed more friendly, I can't think why ( hic ).

Many readers will remember the sofas round the dance floor , I think they'd been in situ since 1916 ! they were the most uncomfortable couches you could imagine- springs sticking out at every conceivable angle, rough moquette covering, not to mention the horsehair stuffing finding its way to the surface ready to impale any unsuspecting legs that may seek rest from dancing , it's no wonder girls gave them a wide berth particularly after the advent of the mini skirt !

Friday nights in the mid sixties the entrance fee was 5 shillings (25p) and the cheapest alcoholic drink was cider 10d (4p). People danced till 1am to Jess Greenough and his orchestra , mid week it was Ronnie Carr and Beat Boys. When The Rolling Stones appeared in November 1963 the entrance was 5 shilling in advance or 5 shilling and sixpence on the door, seems incredible by today's silly money.

I wonder how many people alive today in Wigan and indeed around the world owe their existence to The Empress Ballroom . There must have been thousands upon thousands of marriages that happened because of a first meeting at 'The Emp ' .In the forties and fifties the venue was a particular favourite of the 'Yanks ' from their Burtonwood base and many girls from Wigan became G.I. brides .

This comment from Wigan World will give some idea or how far it tentacles reached -

Comments by **Arlene Norton-Everett, Washington-USA**, 21st May 2012

I was looking for information on The Empress Ballroom as a way of connecting with my Mothers past, she passed away in 2006. My Mother, Edna Green, was born in Wigan in 1922 and lived there until she married in 1951 and moved to America. She had so many wonderful stories about dancing at The Empress. I was surprized to see one of her dance partners mentioned here. She spoke alot of Joe Bertrand and the fun they had dancing together. I have a piece of the dance floor from The Empress that he had given to her on her last trip home. I'll treasure it forever. Thank you for the memories shared here.

On a more parochial front ,most 'Wigan folk' would have gone to the ballroom at sometime or other ; times were very different young men would ask a girl to take the floor in a polite way -'May I have this dance ' , the offer was usually accepted as it would seem churlish to decline, however it was made very very clear if it was to be 'one' dance only , by refusing to engage in conversation and looking anywhere apart from her would be suitor . An often asked refrain " can I walk you home " would often be rebuffed with a firm " I can't leave my friend " If they hit it off , an arrangement to meet would be made the following week . Favourite meeting places for a first date would be Woolworths Corner or Lowe's Department Store ,alas now just memories like The Ballroom itself !

When the venue was renamed 'The Casino' it also got a full licence. I was fortunate to have tickets for the opening night, the star was Shirley Bassey ,who performed fantastically ; however not everyone was delighted when it was announced ' The bar will be closed during Miss Bassey's performance '.

As 'The Casino ' it went on to find worldwide fame as the home of 'Northern Soul ' it closed in 1981 - not for lack of enthusiasm , the town council owed it at that time and had plans to extend The Civic Centre, in the event the plans came to nothing, the cost being prohibitive . People still bemoan the closure of this icon to northern soul but that's another story for another day !

The Ballroom had an unhappy ending , engulfed by fire shortly after the last 'all-nighter' . So many memories blighted by the sight of the ashes , but as we all know memories can't be destroyed ! That is clearly exampled by the remarks from Washington USA cited earlier ,the piece of the dance floor mentioned must be even more treasured after the inferno . These memories of yore will remain - when we 'tripped the light fantastic'. Where so many made friendships were made and where many, metaphorically speaking, took the first step down the aisle !

