

Regal Cinema, Duns and the Burns Family

David McLean (2026)



Commissionaire Thomas Cockburn, ex-KOSB, in front of the Regal Cinema

Introduction

From 1935 until its destruction in 1961, the Regal Cinema provided a vibrant focal point for the social life of the town of Duns; throughout that time, the business was inextricably linked with the Burns family. While some towns had picture houses before the Great War, cinema took off in 1927 with 'The Jazz Singer', the first feature-length film in which the dialogue matched the action on the screen; soon, nearly all films had such synchronised sound. By the mid-1930s, some films were also appearing in full colour and 'going to the pictures' became the most popular entertainment of all, with many people attending their local cinema on two nights every week; by the 1940s, weekly British cinema audiences were numbered in the millions. Clearly, there were opportunities for enterprising individuals in this new branch of the entertainment industry; such a man was Michael Burns.

Michael Burns, Showman

Michael Burns (or Micky Burns as he was known to many) was born in Cavan County, Ireland in 1880, the son of a farm labourer. By 1901, he and his brother Owen had moved to

Scotland and were living in Bathgate in West Lothian where Michael met an Irish girl called Bridget Reynolds and the couple were married in the town's Roman Catholic Church in 1902. They had seven children (one girl and six boys) between 1903 and 1918 – there is a family tree at the end of this paper. The birth certificate for his first child, Dorothy, records Michael still working as a barman in Bathgate but it appears that he was soon running the Dreadnaught public house in the town. His second child, Michael junior, was also born in Bathgate but the family then moved to Armadale where the remaining five children were born. In 1911, he built a theatre in the town called the Star.



Michael Burns, cinema proprietor

In 1920, he moved to Carluke (where he had previously lived for a time) and, in 1927, he opened a cinema and theatre which he had built on a site behind his house; he called it the Alhambra. When it burned down in early 1936 after some celluloid film caught fire, he built an even grander theatre in the town (indeed, over the top in its design) which he named the Windsor. Some of the interior fittings came from the ocean liner Mauretania. The Windsor was officially opened to great fanfare on Christmas Day 1937, the first event being the relaying of the King's Speech. Being the first cinema in the country to carry the name, it was claimed that Burns received Christmas greetings from the Duke and Duchess of Windsor! And if this were not praise enough, messages were reputedly also received from actresses Shirley Temple and Merle Oberon.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Michael Burns (who, it must be remembered, started with nothing) came to own a string of theatres in various towns in west-central Scotland, not just in Carluke but in Cambuslang (the Premier), Forth (the Tinto), Lanark (the Rio) and Larkhall (the Central). His theatres had stages as well as screens so that they could host both variety shows and movies. He had become a 'showman' in the true sense of the word, even touring the country at one time with variety and operatic shows; Burns himself was a talented singer.

Building the Regal Cinema

What attracted him to Berwickshire is unknown but, in September 1932, Michael Burns applied to Duns Town Council to build a cinema on the south side of South Street on a plot of land near the post office. The plans showed a structure some 90 feet by 40 feet, capable of seating over 500 patrons in its auditorium and gallery. Councillors had misgivings, however, doubting whether the proposal complied fully with the Cinemas Act. There were particular concerns about the site – the access passage to the street was considered too narrow in the event of an emergency and the building itself would be too close to the roadway given its 44-foot height. Burns submitted amended plans the following month and these were accepted by the council.

But time passed and the South Street cinema was never built. Michael Burns turned his attention instead to the East Church in Easter Street (which had closed in 1932) and submitted plans to the Town Council for a cinema there in April 1934; these plans, drawn up by architects J Barnet Wylie of Edinburgh, were approved. Extensions were built on to both ends of the church building and the entire interior was reconstructed with seating for around 380 on the ground floor and 180 in the balcony. The oak panelling in the entrance vestibule was sourced from the luxury liner Empress of France as was the chandelier (from the Prince of Wales' apartments on the ship, no less). The vestibule was floored in heavy rubber and so too were the stairs leading to the balcony. Building work was carried out by Henry Steel of Greenlaw.

The spacious auditorium was decorated in tangerine and blue (Duns firm James Hume did all the painter work) with the downstairs seats upholstered in blue and the balcony ones in tangerine which was also the colour of the curtains in front of the screen. The proscenium area was designed with a stage to accommodate concerts and theatrical productions. A café was incorporated into the building.



East United Presbyterian Church, Easter Street, which was converted to the Regal Cinema

The conversion of the church to the Regal Cinema had cost around £10,000. It was officially opened on King George V's jubilee day, 06 May 1935, although the first public film showing was later in the month, on 29 May. The Duns townspeople had been entertained to cinema films before, in the 'County Talkie Theatre' as it was called in the drill hall – organised, in fact, by the Burns family latterly – but they now had something infinitely better. Adverts began to appear in the Berwickshire News for 'the super cinema of the county' as the Regal was styled.

Dorothy Burns

Dorothy Ann Josephine Burns was the oldest of Michael Burns' seven children and the only girl. There is a puzzlement in that her birth certificate (1903) does not show the name Dorothy at all; she is registered as 'Ann Josephine Burns'. But however it came to be, she was known as Dorothy all her life and as Dot Burns in her early years.

She was a trail-blazer in a variety of ways. In 1928, she was awarded a first-class certificate as a wireless operator from the Caledonian Wireless College in Glasgow – the first Postmaster-General's certificate ever awarded to a woman. In the following year, she was appointed as a junior lecturer at the college. Her ambition was to go to sea as a radio officer but no shipping company would take her on, doubtless because she was a woman; an application to the Marconi company, for example, was unsuccessful because her employment would require her to be allocated a separate cabin. She went on to run her own 'ham' radio transmitting station from home for many years. She was also a pilot-member of the Scottish Flying Club which was formed in 1927 and based at Renfrew Airport.

When her father opened the Regal Cinema in 1935, Dorothy Burns moved to Duns with her brother Tommy to manage the new venture. She lived at 8 South Street, officially tenanted by her father according to the valuation roll although he continued living in Carlisle. Dorothy Burns, like her brother Tommy, settled in Duns and the two remained in the town for the rest of their lives. Cinema adverts in the Berwickshire News show three of Michael Burns' sons as official managers of the Regal – John (Jack) Burns originally, followed by Tommy Burns from April 1937 and then Victor Burns from June 1940. However, there is no other evidence of the involvement of Victor and Jack and listing their names as managers was possibly some kind of technicality. At one point, Michael Burns had a serious dispute with a film distributor who informed Burns that films would no longer be supplied to any cinemas managed by his sons. The distributor seemed unaware that Burns also had a daughter. And this, the story goes, is how Dorothy Burns came to take the leading role in running the Regal in Duns!

She soon had ambitions to be involved in civic life. In the spring of 1938, an attempt to co-opt her to a vacancy on Duns Town Council failed but, when the next regular election occurred towards the end of that same year, she was clearly determined not to miss out for a second time. She placed advertisements in the Berwickshire News, issued leaflets and put up posters around the town with her slogan 'Vote for Burns and Prosperity for Duns'. She even organised a few people with cars to take supporters to the poll. No other candidate went to such trouble. As one of six candidates for four seats, she came fourth and secured her place, only the second woman to take a seat on Duns Town Council.

In April, 1941, Dorothy Burns married James McLean Greig in the Roman Catholic chapel on Bridgend; Greig's parents lived in Duns (in the Crescent), his father being a police sergeant in the Berwickshire Constabulary. James Greig was trained and employed in the legal practice of Millar & Morrison in Duns although, at the time of his marriage to Dorothy Burns, he was engaged in war work, policing Leith docks.

The Carluke and Lanark Gazette believed this to be a 'fashionable wedding of considerable interest' probably because of the bride's somewhat unconventional background as wireless station operator and pilot and now as town councillor and cinema proprietor. Even the Sunday Post took notice and published a photograph of the wedding. The ceremony was followed by a reception for around 80 guests in the Castle Hotel in Greenlaw. James Greig then helped his wife manage the Regal Cinema. They made their home at Mount St Michael in Teindhillgreen and had a daughter whom they named Michaele Brigid.



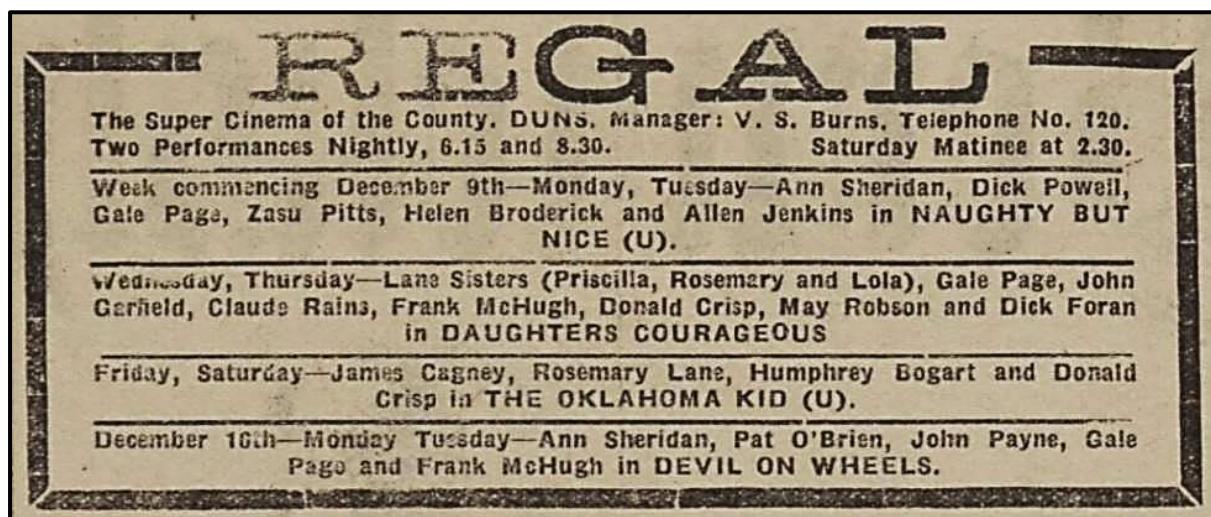
The Burns-Greig Wedding, April 1941 (Southern Reporter)

Dorothy Burns' marriage was to cause some friction in Duns Town Council. Although she had no issue with being 'Mrs Greig', she made it clear that, in public life, she wished to continue to be known as 'Miss Burns'; she believed that this gave her an 'independent identity'. A couple of months after her marriage, she challenged the accuracy of the council minutes which had referred to her as 'Mrs Greig'. The provost clearly had limited patience, declaring it 'a matter he did not wish to dwell upon as they had other business to do'. The feisty Miss Burns was not prepared to give ground, however, and the councillors had to accede to her request. The issue was raised again in 1944 when town clerk William Renton recorded her as 'Mrs Greig' on the grounds that she had now been elected as a bailie. Again,

there was considerable argument but she held firm, having even contacted the Home Office to confirm that there was no reason why she should not be styled 'Miss Burns'.

The Regal Cinema

As the Berwickshire News advertisement below shows, performances at the Regal ran to a well-established pattern. There were two showings each evening Monday to Saturday, the first around 6pm and the second about 8.30pm; in addition, there was an extra Saturday afternoon 'matinee' at 2.30pm. Sometimes, each showing consisted of the main film plus a 'B movie' although it was often only the main feature which was advertised. The Monday/Tuesday performances were the same as was also the case for Wednesday/Thursday and for Friday/Saturday. It was therefore possible to go to the cinema three times every week and see something different each time – perhaps six films in total!



Regal Cinema programme from December 1940 (Berwickshire News)

There were occasions when the cinema hosted local school children. All the pupils from the Berwickshire High School (still in Newtown Street) and the Public School in Langtongate went to see 'Treasure Island' in 1935. Staff and pupils from the High School were similarly invited by Dorothy Burns to view a film on Queen Victoria in 1944. The children of St Abbs School were not specially invited in 1939 but attended a regular Saturday afternoon matinee, paid for by their generous teacher, Miss Pirie, who supplied them with sweets as well!

The Regal hosted numerous other events although, since the cinema showed films every week-day and Saturday evening, these normally had to take place on Sundays. There were concerts and dramatic performances, both from local groups (such as the Duns WRI Dramatic Club or the Duns Amateur Dramatic Society) and from touring concert parties and operatic companies. Dorothy Burns' brother, Tommy, often acted as stage manager. Sometimes, these performances would be designed to raise money for good causes like Berwickshire Nursing

Association in which case the Regal's facilities would often be granted free of charge. During the Second World War, personnel from the Ministry of Information frequently gave talks or presented war-related films, intended both to be educational and to boost morale.

Servicemen, including the Polish soldiers stationed around Duns, were given free admission to the cinema. The Berwickshire High School held its annual speech day and prize-giving ceremony in the Regal in the 1940s; previously, they had often used the drill hall since, before the opening of the new high school in 1958, they never had a big enough space of their own.

In early 1945, Dorothy Burns was granted a licence by the Town Council to hold weekly dances in the cinema (generally on Wednesdays) when the ground floor was cleared of seating; this was 'in response to demand for dances for the young people of Duns'. She was not so fortunate two years later in 1947 when her application to open the Regal on Sundays for regular film screenings was refused. Interestingly, that was the same year in which the town tennis club asked permission to play games on Sunday afternoons which was also refused. It was evidence that times were changing and, while such matters split local opinion, there were many who believed that, especially for young people, Sundays needed to offer something more than church and walks in the park.

It must also be recognised that the Regal was an important provider of employment in the town with work for commissionaires, projectionists, ticket sellers and cashiers, ushers/ice-cream sellers and cleaners as well as cooks and waiting staff to run the cinema cafe.

Councillor Miss Burns

As well as running the Regal Cinema, Dorothy Burns continued as a councillor – Duns Town Council, Berwickshire County Council and finally Berwickshire District Council – for almost half a century, in fact. As described already, she was elected in 1938 on the slogan 'Vote for Burns and Prosperity for Duns'. Her particular desire was to bring more light industries to the town (such as bottling, canning or knitwear factories) to provide employment; she also wished to improve public transport. She was tenacious in her efforts, once describing herself as 'a dictator as far as trying to get industry for Duns is concerned'. She was regularly frustrated in her efforts, however, since it was hard to attract industry without an available workforce and the latter was difficult without sufficient housing. By 1948, Burns was calling Duns a 'dying town' although, in fairness, population decline was then general across Berwickshire and rural areas beyond.

In 1943, as her untiring work in support of local people and projects continued, she was elected by her fellow councillors as senior bailie – two bailies (junior and senior) deputised for the provost when necessary. There was no doubt that her ultimate ambition was to become the first woman provost of Duns and she thought her opportunity had come in 1949.

While Wynsome Maydes had been crowned as part of the town's summer festival since 1944, the first Reiver and Reiver's Lass were only appointed in 1949. Provost Alexander Tait had resigned on the eve of the festival that year following his twelve-month suspension as a solicitor for professional misconduct (a case, apparently, of extreme carelessness). Dorothy

Burns, as senior bailie, stood in as acting provost which meant that she would be at the forefront of the July summer festival ceremonies. It would provide a chance to make a strong public impression and she seems to have managed the events admirably.



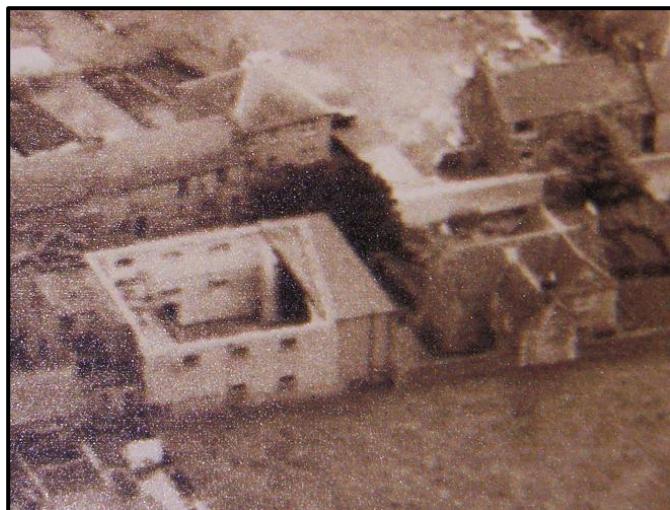
Acting Provost Dorothy Burns addresses the summer festival crowd, 1949

That same month, Duns town councillors elected their new provost. Bailie Robert Davidson who had a drapery business in the town proposed Miss Burns for the post – but there was no seconder. Councillor Reverend Malcolm McCallum (minister of the South Church in Currie Street and council treasurer) was proposed, seconded and supported by at least one other. He agreed to take up the post, saying that there were times ‘when a person has to accept a position against his own conscience’. One can only imagine the feelings of Dorothy Burns who, as senior bailie, was responsible for swearing in McCallum to the office.

End of the Regal Cinema

Early one Saturday morning in March 1961, the Regal Cinema was destroyed in a fire only a fortnight after it had re-opened following a refurbishment; in fact, painters had finished redecoration work only 24 hours earlier. Dorothy Burns said that she would rebuild the cinema but this never happened and the building lay derelict for several years. In late 1968, Miss Burns offered the fire-damaged premises to the town for nothing in the hope that they might be transformed into an entertainment centre but, in early 1969, the finance committee of Duns Town Council expressed gratitude but declined the offer; the cost of rebuilding the structure would be too high. A few months later, Berwickshire County Council gave Miss Burns three months to submit definite proposals for the derelict building, otherwise a demolition order would be enforced.

Dorothy Burns and her husband apparently planned at one point to re-roof the building in hopes that it might become a factory of some sort but, in September 1969, the Berwickshire News reported that they had sold the remains of the Regal to Thomas Wright of Newcastle; his intention was to re-open the café premises while he planned alterations to the rest of the property ‘for entertainment purposes’. By the summer of 1971, no progress had been made and the county council served a section 31 notice on Wright, requiring demolition of the ruined cinema to be started within a month and completed within three months. When Wright declared that he could afford neither the renovation nor the demolition of the building, Duns Town Council decided to purchase the property from him for the land since it was adjacent to their Glebe housing development, then at the planning stage. The demolition of the remnants of the old East Church and Regal Cinema then went ahead and three terraced houses were built on the site in 1973 in the latter stages of the Glebe Park scheme.



Regal Cinema destroyed by fire, 1961

In 1987, at a ceremony in the Volunteer Hall, the Freedom of Berwickshire was conferred on Dorothy Burns together with Lord-Lieutenant William Swan and former prime minister Lord Home of the Hirsel. It was a fitting tribute to someone who had retired from civic life in 1984 when she was into her 80s, thought to be the longest-serving councillor in Scotland at 46 years. Dorothy Burns died in 1990 at the age of 86. Her brother Tommy Burns died in Duns at the age of 87 in 2000 and her husband James McLean Greig died in the town in 2008 at the age of 90.

The information in this paper has been researched from numerous newspapers of the time (in both west-central Scotland and the Borders); from information kindly supplied by Michaelle Burns-Greig and Jude Gardner (respectively daughter and niece of Dorothy Burns); and from public records – census; valuation rolls; and birth, marriage and death records.

Burns (Regal Cinema, Duns) Family Tree

