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Brunel Rooms logo from the 1970s

One of the most famous night spots in the West Country closed it's doors for the last time in late 2007.

After 34 years, The Brunel Rooms at 1 Havelock Square in Swindon's town centre changed hands, received an extensive refurbishment and reopened in 2008 as the Liquid and Envy nightclub.

However throughout the eighties, nineties and early noughties the Brunel Rooms was the place to go for local clubbers. The rise of dance music brought appearances from big name DJs, themed events catering for Trance, Ragga and Hip-Hop and no one who grew up and went to school in Swindon will forget 'Nappy Night' every Wednesday aimed at under-16s.

But in the late seventies it was one of the key live music venues in the area and attracted all the up-and-coming national and international acts that made up the burgeoning Punk and New Wave music scene.

Talking Heads, The Ramones, Blondie, The Damned, Generation X, Ultravox, The Adverts, The Jam and The Boomtown Rats were just some of the legendary bands who played the club's amphitheatre or main hall, some several times over.

John Norman - who along with his brother Eddie and partner Bill Reid - was there from the opening of the club on 16th March 1973, and ran the club for the next 31 years.



John Norman and brother Eddie outside the Brunel

As the man who booked the bands to play at the venue, he explained how it all came about.

"When we opened the club, people came for ballroom dancing," he said. "We had a nine-piece house band and this worked out fine for a while but as the years progressed things started to change and we noticed when the band had a break and the chart music came on the PA, the dance floor filled.

"So we started to think what to do. We looked around, knew we were a big venue and could hold 1100 people, so we thought we'd get some name bands in."

This coincided with the musical revolution going on in the country at the time - the birth of Punk saw scores of bands spring up around the country, and the sub-genre New Wave was also emerging.

These bands were hungry and had a play anywhere, anytime to anyone ethos, and stateside bands were also flooding the country, as Bill explained.

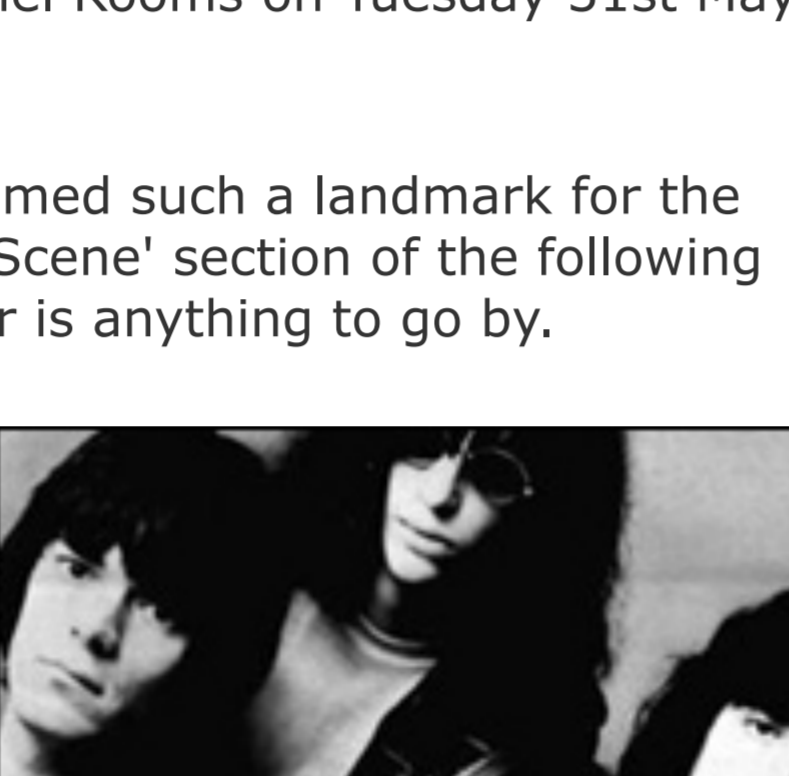
"We used to get tours from America, and they'd use us as a warm-up gig.

"There were lots of bands like Talking Heads and The Ramones who were about to break and their agents were looking for promotional tours for them, so we scored a lot from that. But it wasn't an overnight thing - it took a while to build."

It seems inconceivable now, but rock legends The Ramones and Talking Heads actually shared the bill at the Brunel Rooms on Tuesday 31st May 1977.

Although at the time it may not have seemed such a landmark for the town, if the rather cynical review in the 'Scene' section of the following Thursday's Evening Advertiser newspaper is anything to go by.

An excerpt from the review, headlined 'Ramones smash sound barrier' reads; 'Imagine a solid brick wall of frenetic sound and a bunch of banal lyrics mouthed by the leftovers of a 1960s motorbike gang.



The Ramones

'You've pictured exactly the Ramones "concert" at Swindon's Brunel Rooms on Tuesday night.

'Ironically this group of New York - sorry Noo Yawk - kids are the idols of the English punk rockers.

'Yet they look nothing like punks - no standard safety pins or razor blades and their music is not really in the Sex Pistols mould.

'Apparently they did six encores but I left with a heavy heart, buzzing ears and a disturbed balance.'

A local publication which did fully appreciate the vital and angry new musical genre which was by turns outraging and entrhralling the country, was short-lived Swindon fanzine Rub Out.

The opening page of issue one defiantly warns 'Watch out. This is Swindon's one and only fanzine dedicated to the furtherance of New Wave rock'.

Whilst criticising rival Swindon club - The Affair in Theatre Square's recent decision to change its Wednesday night New Wave music policy, the editorial in Rub Out's inaugural issue goes on to praise the management at the Brunel for bringing acts such as The Ramones, The Damned and The Jam to Swindon.

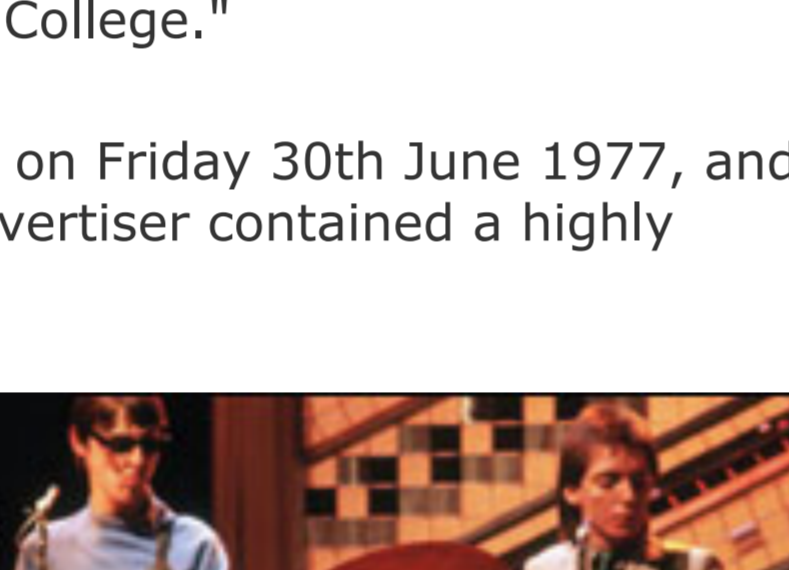
Of The Jam, John Norman remembers that the band played at the club at least three times, as their popularity increased.

"Paul Weller's dad was the manager and he was very enthusiastic. I think he's still his manager now.

"They were just about to break onto the scene and they played in the amphitheatre the first time and it was packed. Then later as they got bigger they came back and played in the main hall. I remember they attracted a lot of students from Swindon College."

The band made their debut at the Brunel on Friday 30th June 1977, and the subsequent review in the Evening Advertiser contained a highly positive notice.

It reads; 'To say the audience got off on it is (1) an understatement and (2) a pretty pointless comment seeing as punk fans in Swindon go totally ape at any new wave gig regardless of merit.



The Jam

'This one though, deserved it. The Jam are commercial, don't look violent or aggressive, but for three guys, make one helluva full sound.'

Bob Geldof and his band The Boomtown Rats played on 16th September 1977, and it was a gig which nearly ended prematurely.

John said: "That was such a hairy night because although they weren't a punk band, that audience took them under their wing, and as soon as they came on they started spitting at them which was a terrible thing, but it was actually a sign of appreciation!

"Bob Geldof walked off stage and wouldn't go back on. He was so angry saying 'why do they did this, why do they always do this?!!' He wasn't one for keeping quiet.

"We had to make an announcement to say if they didn't stop spitting the band wouldn't come back on. There were jeers and shouting but the band returned to the stage and thankfully the crowd behaved themselves.

"It turned out to be a great night, but my heart stopped once or twice!"

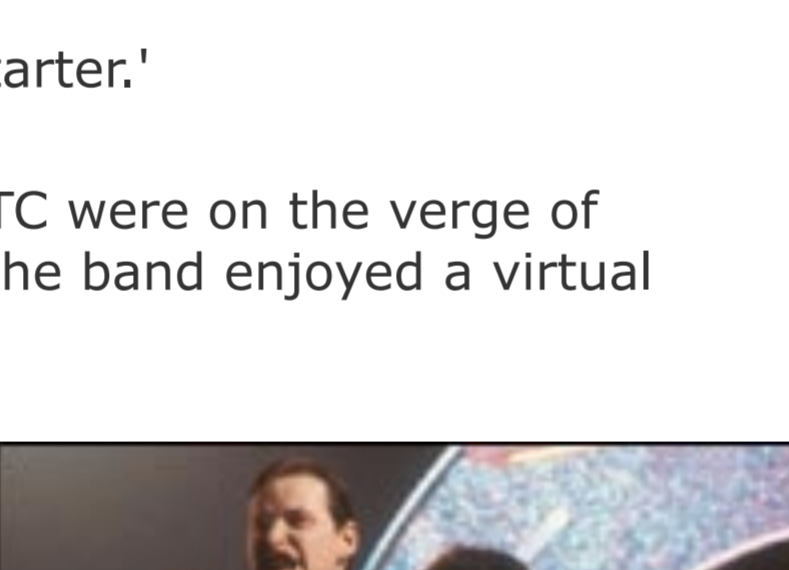
A review in the Thursday 22nd September edition of the Evening Advertiser failed to mention the spitting, but it was as disdainful as that of their Ramones report.

It stated that 'the Boomtowns pummelled us with non-stop mono-licks, but only the revolving bar provided the sort of entertainment Friday nights are made from.'

'Musically this band is an absolute non-starter.'

Swindon's very own New Wave heroes XTC were on the verge of breaking nationally but before they did, the band enjoyed a virtual residency at the Brunel.

"Andy Partridge used to work in McIlroys - the local department store as a window dresser," said John. "And they started out as the warm-up band for the name bands that came in.



XTC

"One gig they did after they had a hit record - the bass-player Colin Moulding had a death threat and wouldn't go on. He was absolutely terrified and they took it seriously.

"So that night we had extra security around him and he was a nervous wreck. But nothing happened, thank god!"

The dawn of the eighties and the popularity of disco music signaled the end of regular live music at the Brunel Rooms, as did newer act's expectations of the venue.

John explained: "One time we'd booked an up-and-coming band called Spandau Ballet, and I had a phone call from the agent to say the tour manager was going to come and see me.

"He came up to the club from London, took one look at the place and said the band couldn't play there.

"I was shocked as we'd never had a problem before but he said it was because of the ceiling height - they wouldn't be able to get all their equipment in. Most of the newer bands needed so much equipment to reproduce the sound they got on record.

"It also started to become more like a circus with the pyrotechnics, lights and strobes and all kinds of visual things along with the music, that it really ended live music at venues like the Brunel."

The club went on to flourish as a dance music venue, but that short period in the late seventies when it attracted name bands as a live music venue, is a fascinating chapter in its long history.

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Have Your Say

If you saw any bands at the Brunel Rooms in the late seventies and early eighties, leave your comments below.

Your name: Your comment: Send

The BBC reserves the right to edit comments submitted.

Robert Grainger

I was there for the Boomtown Rats in 1977. I remember having a lift from Marlborough on a friends 200 Honda Motorcycle - it was cold, even in September. The support band, called Urban Disturbance were very good. I am not sure the report of spitting is actually correct - there was no spitting at all that night - but I do remember an official saying the "Rats are not into Gobbing and will go home if any happens." No gobbing happened and I remember teh Rats playing "Looking after number one" with gusto. I also remember thinking Geldoff was an over opinionated idiot - hmmm

Susan Langford (nee Lees)

I used to work as bar staff and thoroughly enjoyed my time there

Alan Webb

Ah! The Devizes Corn Exchange, I remember it well! A group of us 16 year old music fans jumped on the bus from Swindon to see Juicy Lucy. We arrived at about 9 o'clock and asked the driver "what time is the last bus back to Swindon?" This is it, he replied are you getting on? We refused his kind offer, watched Juicy Lucy, had a great time and walked home!! Yes we walked home, we left at 11 o'clock and arrived back in Swindon at about 6 o'clock Saturday morning! Were we mad? Probably, but it was a fine warm evening and I wouldn't have missed it for anything!

Alan Webb

A good article on the Brunel Rooms. How about throwing down the gauntlet to others to compile a comprehensive list of bands to play in Swindon. This could include The College, The Wyvern, The Oasis & even The Town Hall. I attended many gigs at all these venues before Swindon entered it's 'long cultural wasteland' period. Well done The Oasis for pulling us out. So how about it?

Kevin Tanswell

Yes, living as I did at the time in Devizes, I was a regular at the punk/new wave gigs at the Brunel Rooms and certainly remember the XTC and Jam gigs (and the legendary revolving bar in the main room!). I was at the Ramones/Talking Heads tour when it hit Bristol (in the same week as the Clash/Buzzcocks/Slits and Subway Sect on the 'White Riot' tour and another tour featuring Blondie and Television graced the city). I also recall seeing Elvis Costello at the Affair at the very beginning of his career. There was a terrific buzz around the place that night and we knew we were in the presence of a special talent. A far cry from the prog/rock gigs (the likes of King Crimson, Yes, Rory Gallagher, Gentle Giant, the Faces, etc.) I had been brought up on in Devizes Corn Exchange in the early seventies! Devizes Corn Exchange warrants a mention in any review of Wiltshire music venues, as it was the venue where promoter Mel Bush (who I believe was based in Box) cut his teeth and the bands who played that quiet backwater would be the envy of many a major venue.

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