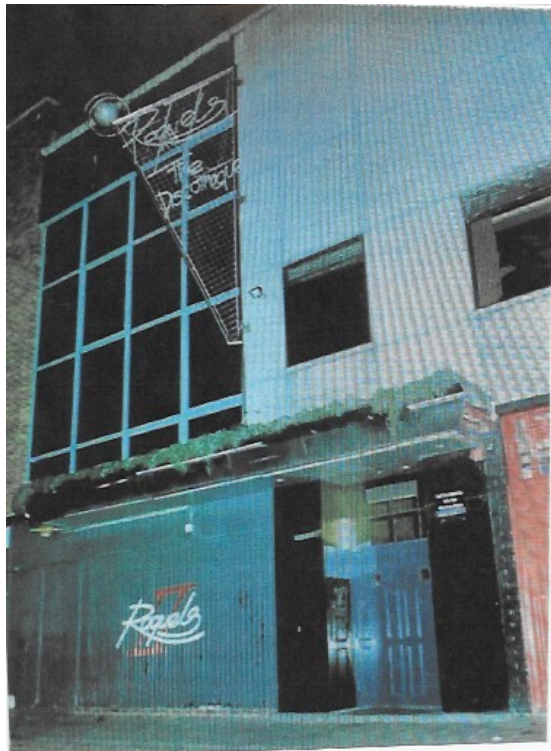


# BASILDON HERITAGE

*A Future for our Past*



## BASILDON MECCA – NIGHT CLUB



**Registered Charity No. 1176037**

*Registered address: The Green Centre, Wat Tyler Park, Pitsea Hall Lane, Pitsea SS16 4U*

## **BASILDON MECCA - LOCARNO – TIFFANY’S –RAQUELS - UROPA**

In the early days of Basildon’s development, the only places to enjoy indoor social events were in the cinemas of Laindon, Pitsea, Wickford and Billericay. Plus, school halls and other halls, including those attached to the parish churches and of course the various public houses.

With the growing construction of new housing estates and the opening of the first shop in August 1958, in what was to become Basildon Town Centre. It was obvious that the town centre would need a function hall. It was decided that the ideal location for a new hall would be above the western end of the proposed South Walk shopping precinct, part of the Town Centre development.

Building work on the four-storey building was soon underway and by 1959 the first phase of Blenheim House, as it became officially known, was completed. The new shopping block of four units were subsequently numbered 1-4 South Walk and the function hall was given a Market Pavement address, number 23. The remainder of the South Walk shops in Phase II were then completed during 1960 and began trading around December of the same year.



*The Mecca - Basildon*

For some strange reason the hall become the responsibility of the Church Commissioners, but was soon taken over by Mecca Dancing Limited in January 1960 who took out a 99 year lease on the building. Internally they established a

main dance floor and stage area, bar areas, groundfloor box office, ladies' boudoirs and a gentleman's stag room. The only major change externally was the installation of brick built, partially enclosed fire escape stairway with exit doors on each level.

The ballroom was named Locarno in keeping with Mecca's other ballrooms around the country, though initially the locals referred to it as the Mecca. The grand opening dance was on Saturday March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1961. Don Darby & his Band and Harvey Kelson Trio provided the evenings entertainment which ran from 7.30pm – 11.30pm at a price of 7s/6d.

It soon proved very popular with the locals and with a standing capacity of 850 people the venue was able to join Mecca's entertainment circuit in booking the many popular artists and groups of the day.

As well as the dance evenings and a Saturday morning disco for teenagers, a variety of other functions were held including bingo nights, dance lesson classes and presentation events.

In the early days some of the country's leading bands were booked such as:- The Dave Clarke Five, The Who, The Kinks, Manfred Mann and The Animals. Prior to the Dave Clarke Five the resident band was the Espresso Five, which included Graham Bradley on the guitar. Graham was to change his name to Bonney and in 1966 became Basildon First Pop star with his song 'Super Girl' reaching number 13 in the the UK charts and number 1 in the Germany charts.



*Graham Bonney – singing Super Gir*

In 1970 the Locarno was renamed Tiffany's, but four years later after a refurbishment it was named Racquels. During the 1980s the the nightclub went through another refurbishment with the name changing to Raquels II, though everybody continue just to refer to it as Racquels.

It was then during the 1980s that Basildon's biggest act to date, Depeche Mode appeared at Raquels.



*Depecho Mode – Racquels*

Alison Moyet also appeared with Yazoo which included Vince Clarke after he left Depeche Mode.



*Alison Moyet and Vince Clarke*

An annexe to the dance floor known as Strings was provided with a Piano Bar and was opened in December 1985. The area was capable of holding around 250 people and featured a small stage on which stood a white grand piano. It closed in 1994 and was replaced by an American themed 'Buzz' Bar.

It was in November 1995 though, when the nightclub's fortunes changed following a national news story involving the death of an Essex teenage girl. The girl, Leah Betts\* from Latchingdon, had taken an ecstasy tablet at her 18th birthday party and

collapsed before falling into a coma. She died just days later at Broomfield Hospital in Chelmsford after her life support machine was switched off. The illegal Class A drug was purchased by a 'friend of a friend' from a dealer operating at the nightclub.

Leah had previously lived in Basildon and had attended Nicholas Secondary School and was currently taking an A-level course at the now demolished Basildon College in Nethermayne. The huge level of publicity generated by the tragedy damaged the nightclub's reputation which was further compounded the following month with the discovery on the morning of 7th December of three members of an Essex 'firm' shot dead inside a Range Rover off a quiet farm track in nearby Rettendon. One of the three, Tony Tucker, who lived in Fobbing, was involved among others in providing security for clubs in Essex, including Raquels. All this bad publicity the nightclub's operators European Leisure to react quickly resulting

in Raquels twenty-one-year run coming to an abrupt end on Friday 29th December 1995.

After a break of nearly a year the venue reopened as Uropa on 5<sup>th</sup> December 1996. Unfortunately, it was short lived and after less than 18 months owners European Leisure closed it down in January 1998, seemingly for good. A Foyer Bar was opened during the final months of Urope.

The upper levels of the building were converted for a time into a snooker bar, but this closed in 2014. It now lies abandoned.

You may or may not be aware but Depeche Mode's overseas fans often come over to Basildon for a tour of their haunts, but unfortunately there is very little to show them, so we are talking with the council in the hope that at least we can have the odd interpretation board on the building and elsewhere in the Town Centre depicted them and the other famous local people who performed there.

So, watch this space.



*The Ex-Night-Club today February 2024*

KFP  
Basildon Borough Heritage Society (BBHS)  
23<sup>rd</sup> Feb 2024

