



Still from *A Record of Stalybridge Wakes* (1927). Holidaymakers awaiting the Blackpool train.

FILM AND THE LOCAL HISTORIAN: THE NORTH WEST FILM ARCHIVE

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The North West Film Archive (N.W.F.A.) grew out of a research project into the history of the local film industry, established in 1977 by Manchester Polytechnic and the North West Arts Association. The emphasis was the location and collection of film that recorded the life of the North West's population or film that was made by its inhabitants. Records relating to the region's film and cinema industries, such as photographs, documentation and ephemera, were also sought and memories captured on tape. The success of this search in uncovering material, especially film with attendant preservation needs, together with the demand for such collections to be accessible in the region, led to the establishment of a film archive based in, and serving, the North West of England. The decision, taken in 1978, to develop from a research project into a public archive took into consideration the operation of two existing film archives in Britain — the National Film Archive in London and the Scottish Film Archive in Glasgow. Over the past decade, we have been working to locate, collect, preserve and make publicly available, archive film about our region in the belief that such films provide a vivid and immediate historical record of the past life of our local communities — an important and unique twentieth-century treasure that should be saved for the future.¹

The film collection of the N.W.F.A. reflects the fortunes of regional film making and cinema attendance. Originating in the mid-1890s, the first moving images entertained music hall audiences often sharing the bill with variety performers. The first film show seen in Manchester was held at the Free Trade Hall on 18 May 1896 and was a programme of Lumiere films, presented by Monsieur Trewey. Soon, travelling showmen, delighted fairground revellers with bioscope shows, assuring them of "No vulgar scenes, suitable for all classes"² — ten-minute programmes of moving trains and crashing waves for one penny or tuppence. Life passing

unrehearsed in front of the hand-cranked camera, was the dominant subject matter and this has left us with a legacy of workers leaving factories and promenaders enjoying a stroll. The earliest film in our collection of *Liverpool Scenes* was taken in 1896 by a Lumiere cameraman. The film shows a bustling St. Georges Plateau and views of the docklands, taken from the overhead railway.

By the turn of this century, films were exhibited in a wide range of venues, from church halls to skating rinks. Film production companies such as Blackburn pioneers Mitchell and Kenyon and Preston's Will Onda established themselves to cater for the growing public appetite for 'animated pictures'. The year 1909 represents a landmark in cinema history with the passing of the first Cinematograph Act. This Act stipulated that films could not be projected from the body of a public hall but that the equipment had to be isolated within a special box in an attempt to prevent the fatal accidents that had occurred when nitrate films had caught fire during a performance and audiences, crammed to capacity, had little chance of escape. The effect of the Act was to herald the era of the purpose-built cinema, as entrepreneurs realised that film was not a passing novelty but a major attraction for working people — and could be a lucrative business. The distinction of being the first purpose-built cinema in Britain, exclusively intended for film exhibition, is contested between the Alexandra Hall, known as Penks Palace, in Blackburn, the New Central Hall, Colne, built for Joshua Duckworth in 1907, and the Bioscope, Victoria, London. As early as 1914 Manchester had 111 cinemas, more per bottoms of the population than anywhere else in the country.³ Cinema attendance flourished during the 1920s when a twice-weekly visit to a choice of local cinemas was the routine for many adults and children's Saturday matinees were tremendously popular. The 1930s was the decade of 'sound' and 'art deco' picture palaces, where the luxurious interiors



Still from Liverpool Scenes (1896) by Lumiere. The earliest film in the archive.

complemented the fantasies of the feature film. The high point of cinema attendance was reached in the 1940s but, sadly, this was countered by the rapid decline of the 1950s as cinema gave way to bingo halls, supermarkets and the deadly rivalry of television. Within half a century, the most popular form of mass entertainment, rose and fell.

The feature film, either home grown or imported, was the great draw for cinema goers. However, the nightly programme also included newsreels, advertisements and 'shorts' and it is these films that significantly represent the work of the professional film-maker in our collection. The film collection of the N.W.F.A. is composed exclusively of material made in or about the North West of England. The region covers Lancashire, Cheshire, Merseyside and focuses particularly on Greater Manchester.⁴ The collection roughly numbers 15,000 cans and is overwhelmingly non-fiction in content. In terms of professional material, cinema newsreels, documentaries, publicity and promotional items made for, and in some cases 'by, local industry, commerce and municipal authorities are held by the N.W.F.A. In addition, extensive collections of B.B.C. North West regional television programmes represent the filmed record of the area over the past two decades. In respect to amateur

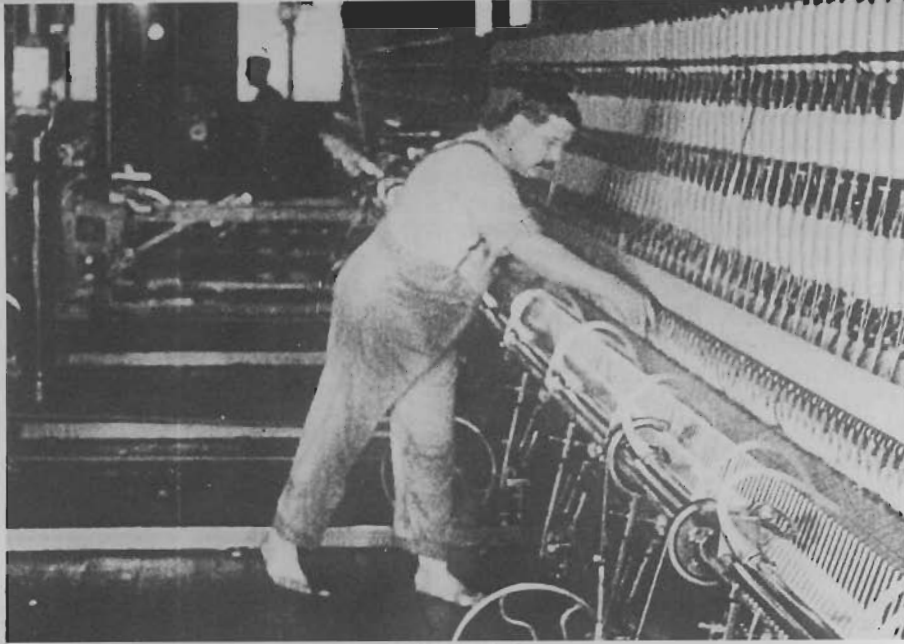
material the work of home movie enthusiasts and club or society members provides a different perspective on the life of the region. Generally, the archive will accept film of any gauge and of any age as long as it is relevant to the North West.

The collection is especially strong in professional material from the first four decades of this century, showing urban, industrial life. The themes of street life, work, leisure, entertainment, celebrations, holidays and participation in two world wars are well illustrated. We have a particular interest in films which record the ordinary and everyday aspects of life for local working people. Ironically, though routine life was caught by the cameras of early film pioneers, as cinematography developed in costs and complexities, film was reserved for more important civic events and dignitaries. For this reason, a film of *Stockport Market* taken around 1910 where the unknown cameraman has panned around the market-place and left us a fascinating ninety seconds record of the types of stalls, transport and advertising to be found, is a rarity and a true gem in the collection. Film, passing in front of a hand-cranked silent camera at speeds ranging from 12 to 20 frames per second, or standardised with the advent of synchronised sound to 24f.p.s., is the ideal medium to record 'action' whether on the sports field, in the mill, in the dancehall or in the trenches. The archive's collection includes a rich selection of sporting events, from cricket, football and rugby matches to boxing, whippet racing and bowling. The camera sweeps not only the field of action but also embraces the mood of the crowd in its wide shots. The camera's capacity to record general views as well as close up details, is one of its great strengths as an historical witness.

We would be a very poor archive of North West life if we did not have films on the major employer of the region — the textile industry. Fortunately, a wide range of films document this vital form of employment, ranging from the shawl-covered girls leaving William Cleggs' mill in Milnrow in 1913 and weavers at Barlow & Jones Limited, Bolton in 1919 to a visit of the Sultan of Zanzibar to Horrockses, Preston in 1929 and the output of the Cotton Board in the 1950s and 1960s. From such films, we can build up a more realistic picture of the particular aspects



Still from Stockport Market (1910).



Still from Barlow & Jones (1919) showing a mule spinner at work.

of production undertaken by men and women; how workers were dressed; the sequence of production from raw material to finished goods; the range of responsibility undertaken by each worker such as the number of machines supervised; the speed at which production was executed; whether up-to-date machinery and techniques were employed; the working conditions prevailing in the mills than is possible by consulting other visual sources such as photographs. Our two films of textile work in 1919 have been used in a B.B.C. documentary to show how the mill interiors, clouded with cotton dust, gave use to the disease of byssinosis. Spinners working in the mill also can be seen leaning across their mules, contaminating their clothing with the oil which caused scrotal cancer. In addition, both these films are titled in four languages — English, French, Spanish and Portuguese indicating that they were intended to be shown abroad. Historians have suggested that the films were made to boost export orders and compensate for markets lost, to America, during the upheaval of the First World War. The films concentrate on busy production lines and efficient workforce. Other local industries are also well represented in the Archive, and thanks to the deposit of collections from, for example, Carborundum and G.E.C. of Trafford Park, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, Shell, Kelloggs, Pilkingtons, Kearns of Broadheath and Unilever, local researchers interested in business and economic history can gain some unique insights into the factory organisation and production methods of the early decades



Paramount Cinema, Oxford Street, Manchester in the 1930s (now the Odeon).

of this century.

However, film is not a definitive record — we have to look elsewhere for the details of wages, hours, working hierarchy etc. and to find out how people felt about their work and conditions. The examples from our textile material have been cited to illustrate the place that film can take alongside other forms of historical evidence in illuminating the past. Virtually all our films that show aspects of working life fall into the categories of advertising or promotional material and clearly the purpose for which they were originally intended has to be taken into account, in common with other records, when critically assessing their historical value. Moving pictures can convey their message with a strong sense of reality and actuality — the event has been recorded by the camera, as it happened. The camera may be an impartial witness — but the cameraman is not. It is important to consider the reasons why a particular film was shot — to impress, to gain support, to justify change, to shock. The director or cameraman selects the aspects of any particular event which he wishes to highlight, and omission can cause distortion. A newsreel does not necessarily present a balanced view of any event — it is only one particular perception of 'truthful' reporting. Add to this power of selectivity, the ability to skilfully edit images post-filming; discarding some sequences and emphasising others; re-arranging the order of shots, and it is easy to see how misleading film can be! All this before we enter the realm of deliberately faking action (such as the faked Boer War topicals) or misrepresenting places. The apparent authority of the commentary can even be misleading and the skilful association of commentary and picture can make potent propaganda.

We are very fortunate that the considerable rivalry between local cinemas, competing for their audience from the 1910s onwards gave birth to a new genre of film — the local 'newsreel' or 'topical'. Whilst the major companies such as Pathe and Gaumont dispatched cameramen to cover important national events, their staff were often called upon by local cinema managers, anxious to attract customers, to film events of exclusive interest to one particular community, such as the annual carnival, whitwalk or a local sporting event. Thanks to this promotional gambit, we have inherited a rich legacy of films, mostly documenting local celebrations and leisure activities. The local cinema newsreel acted as 'the collective camera' recording these community events. The working families who proudly feature in these films would certainly not have been able to afford the costs of

equipment and processing involved in cinematography. The 2½ minute film, *A Record of Stalybridge Wakes Week, 1927* is one such example. Made for the New Princes Cinema the film shows the town's population waiting at the railway station for the train to Blackpool convey far more powerfully and concisely than any newspaper account could do, this aspect of the leisure patterns of an industrial community. The film starts with a slow panning shot, designed to cram in as many faces as possible, and it ends with an exterior shot of the cinema with assembled staff. We managed to trace one usherette, Elsie Wootan, who recalled the excitement of the returned holidaymakers as they recognised themselves and their friends on the screen. The New Princes was packed that evening! In many cases, just one copy of such local newsreels was made and we are indebted to those cinema managers, owners and projectionists for the record that they have left us of shared community high days.

A glance through the titles in the Archive's film collection will give a strong impression of the North West that worked hard — and played hard. The omissions in coverage are glaringly obvious. Where are the films which show political activity or industrial action? There are no



The Piccadilly Picture Theatre, Manchester, c. 1923.

trade union processions or scenes from the General Strike in 1926. Where are the shots of the unemployed on street corners or in the dole queues in the 1930s depression? We have to ask the questions — Were the films made on these subjects? Have they survived the neglect, decay and destruction of time? Are they just waiting for us to find them? Of course we know that such subjects were filmed as examples can be traced to the major newsreel collections and national archives. We would dearly love to find such material for our own collection and I cannot explain its absence to date. Apart from the classic images of the North's dark, satanic mills and back-to-back houses (which we can provide) and shots of the unemployed in misery (which we can't), we are often asked for films that show the home lives of working people. The camera seems to have very rarely penetrated into individual homes in the early part of the century — even photographs of the intimate, daily routines of family life are scarce. Although the availability of the amateur film gauges of 16mm and 9.5mm in the interwar years enabled home movies to be made by better-off families, even their films were reserved for the special events of family life such as holidays and weddings rather than the everyday and mundane aspects of life.

In order to make the considerable information contained in any single film accessible, careful documentation is needed. The essential access document to the films in the N.W.F.A. is the shotlist, which carefully distils the fullest information from a film. The shotlist is a detailed, accurate sequential account of a film's action, which also records all titles and subtitles. Frequent footage counts are included so it is possible to work out the duration of any particular sequence. From the shotlist, indexes relating to title, date, subject (including place and personality) and production are maintained. The time-consuming nature of this documentation and the prior claims of film retrieval and preservation, inevitably result in a backlog. Five hundred films have been absorbed into the main collection, with an equal number awaiting attention.

The index system is the 'in-point' for public users and the archives staff are pleased to advise personal, telephone or written enquirers on the collections coverage. In 1985, we

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A poster for Pringle's Picture Palace (formerly The Empire), Rochdale, c. 1910.

produced a film catalogue which gives detailed synopses and indexes to four hundred films. The catalogue is available, for reference, in the region's public libraries and record offices. Requests of a general nature will be referred to suitable shotlists to aid selection. The shotlists act as a buffer to the films, preventing unnecessary wear and tear, particularly important when only original material is held. Once the appropriate film/films have been chosen, supervised viewings take place at the archive, using our specialised equipment. It is necessary to arrange an appointment to view to ensure the availability of staff/equipment. In addition, in cases where only an original is held, the 'master' material is stored at the Greater Manchester Record Office and has to be brought over for viewing. No charge is made to the general public or bona fide researchers for access to the collection. The archive regrets that it is not able to loan or hire films. However, during term-time, evening appointments can be arranged for individual viewings or group screenings, on the premises.

A considerable amount of access is promoted outside the archive's walls. Since its inception, the N.W.F.A. has presented programmes of public film shows to a wide variety of audiences, including local societies, schoolchildren and hospital patients. During this year, an ambitious programme, arranged in public venues, with free admittance has been mounted. Each film show is compiled from the 16mm viewing collection and no charge is made for this service, by arrangement with copyright holders and donors. Thousands of people in the region have enjoyed seeing the past come to life on the screen and the shows attract all ages. Apart from popularising our work, the shows are also useful in attracting deposits and finding out additional information about the collection. Whilst public film shows are a very successful way of bringing our collections to general audiences, we are aware that some sections of the community require more specialised attention.

The educational potential of our unique source of regional primary evidence has long been recognised by both primary and secondary school teachers. The practicable and organisational problems faced by our staff in the classroom have been overcome by the launch, in 1986, of the North West Film Archive Schools Project. The initial task was to liaise with local teachers in order to

determine the most appropriate selection and organisation of our material. Research had shown that the transfer of the films on to video cassette, would provide teachers with an easily accessible and versatile format for use in the classroom. From past experience, we believe that our films have a relevance to teaching across a broad spectrum of the curriculum and over a wide age range. Whilst priority was given to the full exploitation of our film resource, the whole range of the Archive's collections were drawn upon in order to provide teachers with a rich bank of primary evidence. Teachers Resource Packs have been produced on the following themes — How Your Great Grandparents Used to Live; Leisure and Holidays; The Home Front During the Two World Wars; Transport in the Region; the Textile Industry; Glimpses of Family Life; The North West at Work. Each resource pack contains one VHS video cassette of selected films or extracts; a selection of copied photographs (e.g. film stills); one audio cassette with appropriate recorded interviews; a selection of supporting documentation (e.g. newspaper articles) and a teacher's notes booklet. The packs are available for loan, at no charge, from selected teachers centres in the region.⁶

The North West Film Archive would not exist without the co-operation and support of the region's archivists and librarians. These colleagues recognised that the fragile, perishable and, in some cases, inflammable, nature of archive film demanded that a central agency was established to serve the region, with staff trained in preservation skills and specialised viewing equipment. Preservation and access demands monopolise staff time and we feel that our responsibility lies in securing the filmed heritage of the North West.⁷ This emphasis on the development of the collection means that unfortunately, research into the history of the local film and cinema industries is not undertaken. However, ample scope exists for this work, examining such aspects as cinema attendances; cinema architecture; film rental and distribution; film production; impact of circuit operations; labour relations; and family businesses.⁸ Cinema towered over the first half of this century as the most popular form of mass entertainment, establishing almost religious routines of observance amongst local working people. It is a phenomenon surely worthy of detailed examination by historians of the region.

NOTES

1. The N.W.F.A. is funded by Manchester Polytechnic; British Film Institute; Association of Greater Manchester Authorities; Lancashire County Council; Cheshire County Council; Granada Television; B.B.C. North West; The Office of Arts and Libraries.
2. Advertised outside the first Crighton bioscope show in 1899, called the 'Eragraph'.
3. Kine Year Books provide a directory of cinemas, listed alphabetically by location from 1914. The listings are not definitive as entries were dependent on cinema responses.
4. Because of the previous lack of facilities in neighbouring counties, we have also accepted, by special arrangement, films from Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Cumbria and the Isle of Man.
5. *Dust to Dust*, B.B.C. 1, 17 Aug 1982.
6. A leaflet giving full details of this resource and availability has been produced.
7. Currently, there are two full-time and one part-time members of staff.
8. Research work currently in progress includes: Robin Whalley, *Theatres, Cinemas and Filmmaking in Blackburn*; William Shenton, *Stockport Cinemas*; Tony Flynn, *The History of Salford Cinemas*; Clive Garner, *Liverpool Cinemas*; Charles Morris, *Rochdale Cinemas*; Philip and David Williams, *Ashton-under-Lyne Cinemas*.
Published work on the region includes (copies at N.W.F.A.): Tony Flynn 'The History of Eccles Cinemas and Theatre' (1989); Julian Poole 'British Cinema Attendance in Wartime: Audience Preference at the Majestic, Macclesfield', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* Vol 7, No. 1, 1987; Baynham Honri, 'The Blackburn Movies — Early Motion Picture Developments in the Provinces' *British Journal of Photography*, 11 March 1977.

FURTHER READING

Rachel Low, *The History of the British Film* (7 vols; London 1949-85) is an indispensable introduction to the key changes which have shaped the cinema in Britain. Other useful general studies include John Barnes, *The Beginnings of the Cinema in England* (Newton Abbot, 1976); Dennis Sharp, *The Picture Palace* (London, 1969); E. Betts, *The Film Business — A History of the British Cinema 1896-1972* (London, 1973); David Atwell, *Cathedrals of the Movies: a History of British Cinemas and their Audiences* (London, 1980). Issues surrounding the use of film as an historical source are explored in the volume of essays, Paul Smith, (ed), *The Historian and Film* (Cambridge, 1976) and J.A.S. Grenville, *Film as History: The Nature of Film Evidence* (Birmingham, 1971). *Film Literature Index* (vol 15, 1987-) is an invaluable annual listing of the massive and diverse literature on all aspects of film.