

MANCHESTER'S FIRST CINEMAS 1896-1914

William Shenton



Film cameraman in Albert Square c.1902

Most local studies of the cinema trade tend to concentrate on the post World War One era by which time it was firmly established. It is easy to understand the reason for this neglect of the trade's formative days as much of the information available is fragmentary or contradictory, especially that based on verbal accounts. However in many cases these are the only records available. In the beginning many of those involved in the industry actively shunned publicity, including the trade journals. However, it can be established that the elements of the new industry, public acceptance of films, the cinema buildings, the star system and development of film grammar and a system of distribution fell into place from 1908. This article attempts to provide a framework for understanding how the cinema trade developed in the city of Manchester.

The importance of this early period is clear when one considers that out of the more than 140 cinema sites to operate in the city only 43 were opened after 1914. Some of these early buildings were forced into modernisation and rebuilt in the 1920s and 1930s at the behest of the City Council but many survived almost unchanged until the sharp decline in attendance of the 1950s. It is also important to understand that the rise of the cinema did not take place in isolation but was a reflection of a greater change in society. The Edwardian working class was becoming relatively better off with time available for leisure pursuits. Even though money remained scarce there occurred a substantial growth in attendances at spectator sports and variety theatres, and just prior to the cinema boom a craze for roller skating swept the country. The size of the audience grew to take in the events offered and the cinema and music hall in particular managed to live side by side. While the working class flocked to the cinema the middle class and establishment, ever censorious, voiced concern over the content of films and horror at the activities which could take place in darkened auditoria. To the working-class audience, one appeal of

early films was certain to be the "low comedies" similar to sketches seen in the variety theatre, which frequently mocked authority and the better off. For the young couple the cinema provided an affordable refuge from a crowded working-class home other than the public house.

The first demonstrations of moving pictures in 1895-6 are well-recorded and were the result of work by a number of people working independently in different countries. Significant contributions were made by Louis Le Prince, a Frenchman who worked in England and America; William Friese Greene, Robert W. Paul and Birt Acres in England; Thomas A. Edison and W.K.L. Dickson in America; Auguste and Louis Lumiere in France and the Skladanowskys in Germany. The first machines demonstrated were the Lumiere Cinematographe, Paul's Theatregraph, Edison's Vitascope and the Skladanowsky's Bioscop. The new medium however took some time to be regarded as more than a mere novelty and it was more than a decade before the first purpose-built cinemas began to appear.

The Cinematograph Act of 1909, which came into force in 1910, ushered in the age of the purpose-built cinema in Britain. Films were printed onto highly inflammable nitrate stock and a number of fires had occurred at film exhibitions. The Act made local authorities responsible for ensuring that premises complied with the safety standards contained within it, before issuing a cinematograph licence. Before this, from 1896 many city centre and suburban halls and theatres were the usual location for film shows by both travelling showmen and local entrepreneurs. Records of suburban shows are sketchy, but those held in city centres were well reported. An important additional venue was the fairground and many people would see their first films in a tent or sideshow. This primitive period in the history of the cinema was marked by frequent complaints regarding faults in the images presented (vibration and flicker), the unreliability of projection equipment and the bad management of the shows. These complaints, some of which would persist well into the new century, were more the result of inexperience among managers and operators than technological difficulties and were gradually resolved as the trade developed.

The earliest shows were of less than a half an hour's duration, made up of crude snippets of film often as part of a variety theatre bill, but by the time the Cinematograph Act was passed they had grown into programmes of more sophisticated, longer films, capable of providing a full evening's entertainment. Early films were without titles, and a compere was an essential guide to what was happening on the screen and to amuse the audience while reels were changed. Music and often singers were also important additions and many companies employed full bands to accompany and supplement their film programmes. Initially showmen tended to stay in the city for short periods, usually two weeks, moving on as the novelty of their offerings waned, but in the early 1900s this changed and audiences were more regularly served as halls were booked for longer periods, or the growing number of travelling companies returned more frequently.

The patriotic fervour which greeted footage of the Boer War increased interest in the new medium, but audiences were largely unaware that many of these war films were faked, filmed, as were many other foreign news items, in this country.

Initially films represented little more than views and brief jokes, but after the turn of the century they became longer and more ambitious in content. Film production was an international affair and within this country a regional activity, with important production centres in Brighton, Sheffield and South Wales. Some of the most sophisticated early films came from the studio of French stage magician Georges Méliès, who not only produced some notable early fantasy films, but also recreated actual events in the manner of today's "drama-documentaries". Among his best known films were *A Trip to the Moon* and a recreation of the coronation of King Edward VII.

In 1901 an audience could still expect to see a programme made up largely of news footage with perhaps one or two short fictional subjects. These would run up to one reel, about fifteen minutes in length. By 1910 while the short film still dominated, production had become more structured and programmes included westerns, comedies, adaptations of the classics, and melodramas interspersed with newsreels while often still including contributions from live performers. Players were unbilled until around 1910 when producers realised the drawing power of particular performers and began to actively promote them. Among the first screen stars were comedian John Bunny and actresses Florence Lawrence and Mary Pickford, while three major stars, Charlie Chaplin, William S. Hart and Douglas Fairbanks made their first films in 1914. In the years just prior to the war longer, feature films began to emerge from France and Italy and later America, often employing star names from the theatre.

The production of more sophisticated films was a key element in the growth of the cinema exhibition trade, but other factors were also important. The Edwardian craze for roller skating gave entrepreneurs a taste of the profits to be made from the new public desire for leisure pursuits. As the popularity of roller skating waned many turned over to use as cinemas. The increasing success of the touring companies also reflected the rising popularity of the medium and these companies opened some of the first permanent shows. The Companies Act of 1907 extended limited liability to small businesses and this increased the willingness of local businessmen to invest in risky ventures such as cinemas. This was the most popular form of ownership for early cinemas, with one man acting as promoter of the company and bringing in the other shareholders. Many of the early promoters had worked for travelling showmen or renters but other occupations were represented, including pawnbrokers, market traders, builders and shopkeepers. One of the best known was H.D. Moorhouse, an accountant, who by the time of his death in 1946 had built up a circuit of almost 60 cinemas. The promoter having selected a likely site would approach local tradesmen and businessmen as potential investors. The capital of these companies varied from as little as £500 to over £5,000. For this latter sum a solid, well-furnished cinema could be built and equipped.

Another vital element in the growth of the trade was the development of film renting, which by 1914 was well established, with the trade press recognising Manchester as a major centre. In the early days the touring company or local showman would buy or shoot his own films, with

First Public Shows

The first recorded public film shows in Manchester were held at the St James's Theatre, Oxford Street and the old Y.M.C.A. building on Peter Street in 1896. The St James's Theatre had been opened on 2 June 1884 by James Kelly, proprietor of the adjoining St James's Hall, and by 1896 the lessee was Richard Flanagan. The Kinopitikon opened for matinee performances, daily from noon to

secondhand films being traded by dealers such as the Amateur Photographic Depot at 71 Oxford Road, Manchester. The first renters appeared around 1907-8 and began by buying up secondhand films and hiring them out to exhibitors. This soon changed and the renters came to act as middlemen between film producer and exhibitor. When the Incorporated Association of Film Renters was formed in 1910, with a total membership of 61 renters, it included 8 firms from Manchester. The larger film producers ran their own renting offices and these included the American Bioscope at 22 Victoria Street, Cannon at 34 Deansgate and Pathe Freres at 15 Deansgate. By 1914 almost 40 independent renters operated in the city. They would negotiate with film producers, or their British agents for the right to distribute films, usually only in Lancashire and Cheshire.

Renters would in later days become centralised around Deansgate, but in the early years firms were also located in Fountain Street, Cannon Street, Market Street and Corporation Street. One of the city's earliest and largest renters, and one of the founder members of the Central Incorporated Association of Film Renters, was the Central Film Agency, run by James Blakeley, with the help of his son John E. Blakeley. Blakeley began working from his home in Union Street, Ardwick before moving to offices in Great Ducie Street, another favoured location where his close neighbours included seven such firms. Some renters entered into agreements with exhibitors to supply all their programme requirements, but this type of deal was soon supplanted as competition amongst exhibitors increased and they began to shop around for the more popular films.

The travelling showmen had often filmed local events as additions to their bills of purchased films, but gradually production companies were established to provide these. In Manchester the Lama Film Producing Company Ltd of Blackfriars Street was among the most important. Formed in July 1913 this company announced the following January the availability of a "Lancashire and Yorkshire Weekly Budget" newsreel. It was also employed by individual exhibitors to produce films of local interest and later produced a large number of industrial and commercial films. The Manchester Film Producing Company (previously the Paragon Photo Enlarging, Film and Film Title Producing Company) located at 59 Rosamond Street East, Chorlton on Medlock, also supplied such a service. It was located next to Stanley Blinkhorn's Paragon Picturerome which was used for viewing rushes. The company opened premises around 1914 and these included printing and developing rooms, with three printers and a film cleaning and burnishing department. There was also a separate studio for the filming of titles and five cameras available for use. The works were managed by Charles H. Yonwin, a former cameraman for the Sheffield Photo Company, a leading early British film producing company. The Manchester Film Renovating Company of Corporation Street was also much used by renters for the repair of damaged films.

6pm, on 4 May 1896. It was the invention of British cinema pioneer, Birt Acres and had first been demonstrated to the Royal Photographic Society in London on 14 January, as the Kinetic Lantern. It was first shown to the public on 21 March. Given the performance times this programme would have been seen by few of the working class, and significantly the size and composition of the audience was not reported.

The *Manchester Courier* of 6 May 1896 reported the performance in some detail.

The pictures put on the screen are really marvellous productions for the spectator sees the people depicted move and act as though they had their being in real life. These effects are obtained by a series of photographs taken instantaneously after each other being passed through a lantern slide in such rapid succession that the division between each picture is imperceptible to the auditor, who merely sees men and women moving before him with all the appearance of nature and life. An exceptionally good picture is Derby Day (1895). The audience sees the course cleared, the race run and the crowd burst forth in their enthusiastic rush to the bookmakers. Another is a realistic reproduction of "beer-time" in a carpenter's shop in which you see the men in turn drop their tools and pass the jug round. The capture of a pickpocket is also faithfully reproduced. Although the exhibition suffered somewhat from a defective light on the occasion of our visit, this will no doubt soon be remedied. It is well worthy of a visit.

Clearly these early films were seen as little more than a novel animated version of the familiar lantern slides although they did risk moral criticism by including scenes of gambling and drinking. No press reports have been traced for the shows held at the Y.M.C.A., which also began, for one week, on 4 May 1896. The company advertised their apparatus as the "Cinematographe", but when the Lumiere Cinematographe opened in the city two weeks later, the announcement labelled it "the original" and added "beware of imitations", so that the one presented at the Y.M.C.A. was probably not the Lumiere Cinematographe.

In the event the Cinematographe made its appearance at the Lesser Free Trade Hall, Peter Street from 18 May 1896 for a two week visit. Shows began every half hour from 2pm to 9pm and admission was 1s 0d. The Lumiere apparatus had made its first public appearance in Paris in December 1895, with a London demonstration following in February 1896. The inventors, Auguste and Louis Lumiere were not themselves showmen and selected as their English representative "Professor" Lucien Trewey, who had appeared in music halls as a juggler and hand shadow performer. The high cost of admission (one shilling) would have restricted the audience to the better off working class and above.

The *Manchester Courier* (19 May 1896) also reported on this company, but in more glowing terms than those used for the Kineoptikon, describing it as a "scientific beauty" and continued:

The animated pictures are so lifelike as to almost betray the onlooker into a belief that they are living men and women. Some of them are very amusing too, one of them being a family party at tea where the baby is being fed and another a game of cards where the changing



Alfred Ball's bioscope show c.1898

expressions on the faces of the players are reproduced to the life. The Cinematographe must be seen to be believed. It is a veritable triumph for science.

The august *Manchester Guardian* (20 May 1896) was more restrained but did add to the description of the films shown. "One scene shows a number of factory girls issuing from the gates of a Lyons factory, with all the bustle and activity that mark departures at meal times. Bicyclists too, mount their machines and ride off through the laughing crowd. Other pictures are of a train arrival at a French country station, of card playing in a Paris cafe, and of domestic scenes.

Free Trade Hall

The Free Trade Hall, the city's third building to bear that name, had been opened in 1856, and housed two halls; the large hall with seating for 4,600 and the lesser hall accommodating 600. Both had been used by travelling showmen for many years and some of these now added the cinematograph to their bill for fare. One such was Harry H. Hamilton's Excursions, which had been visiting the Hall since the 1870s. His early shows were forerunners of later cinematograph performances. An 1880 show in the large Free Trade Hall entitled *Round the Globe in 120 Minutes* took the audience from Charing Cross to China, via Paris, the St Gothard tunnel, Venice, Mauritius, Egypt, India, Burma, San Francisco and New York, returning to Liverpool. The performance included scenes of the recent Afghan War including the bombardment and capture of Kabul by British troops. The scenes were accompanied by a descriptive lecture and instrumental band with characteristic songs, and jests by Hamilton's own black and white minstrels (*Manchester Evening News*, 25 August 1880). Early film shows would copy this format with a compère to explain the action and music and variety turns to break up the performance. From 1901 Hamilton, in step with the times added "the most perfect animated picture projector yet invented" to his show, but he was not the first, others had already taken the plunge. One was the variety company run by Mr and Mrs Victor Andre who had added the cinematograph to its specialities of mind-reading, ventriloquism and conjuring from their March 1897 visit, and they too would continue to pay regular annual visits to the Hall for many years.

The large Hall's first large-scale cinematograph display took place for three days from Monday 17 January 1898, when the Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight for the championship of the world held in Carson City in March 1897 was shown on the Veriscope. There were five performances at prices ranging from one to three shillings, seen by a

In 1901 the Thomas Edison Animated Photo Company run by A. D. Thomas rented the Hall from May to August with prices from 6d to 3 shillings, the company claimed to have been visited by over 60,000 people during its first week. Despite a less than flattering Press report of the opening show of the China and Boer wars the following month the

animated photographs of cycling. Counties Cycle Show in February 1898 also included Bazaar, held in October 1896. The 7th Annual Northern Bazaars, the Hall's first films were included in a "Grand Frequently used for political meetings, exhibitions and the rival city-centre venue to the Free Trade Hall. Reilly, a Manchester businessman, intended the Hall to be hall, with space for 1,000 people. The proprietor, James Lesser Hall was later added over the entrance to the main gallery, stalls and boxes it boasted seating for 10,000. A (the stage) at the southern end of the central bay. With a 136 feet wide and consisted of three bays, with a platform Free Trade Hall. The interior measured 178 feet long by not as frequently used for cinematograph shows as the The St James's Hall, Oxford Street opened in 1881 was

St James's Hall

1920s, usually for a short season of a particular film. the Hall continued to be rented for cinema shows into the issued in respect of the Hall to Charles Joseph Stewart and 1910 one of the city's first cinematograph licences was programmes were changed three times a week. In April performances had moved into the large Hall and (April 1912). By the time the last named was shown *Crusoe* (January 1911); and *Zigomar vs Nick Carter* and the *Blue Diamond* (December 1910); *Robinson* title, included *Cleopatra* (March 1910); *Sherlock Holmes* disaster were featured. Fictional films, now advertised by Edward, the Derby and Ascot, and the Paris express performances. News items such as the funeral of King 3d to 2s 0d, and a full orchestral band on hand at all Pictures" at 3pm, 7pm and 9pm with prices ranging from company offered "Bright, Brilliant, Beautiful, Modern later organised one of the city's first cinema circuits. This Bioscope Company, controlled by Bernard Rhodes, who Hall, was run as a full-time cinema by the International and occasionally, usually at Bank Holidays, the Large From October 1909 till November 1912 the Lesser Hall,

the Oberammergau Passion Play. Company's major offering in January 1908 was a film of more novelty; while the Great London Animated Picture pictures included *Scenes from the Arabian Nights* provided Company (February 1907), whose coloured animated *Service - Afloat and Ashore*; the Paris Modern Theatre (1906), who offered more patriotic with *Life in the King's* included Gale and Polden's Animated Pictures (January silent, black and white film. Other notable companies technological advances allowed them to displace the audiences and exhibitors, and it was many years before appear they were still regarded as novelties by both pictures". Although colour and sound films continued to "marvellous Chronophone - singing and talking "Sydney Carter's New Century Pictures", the earthquake, and in December 1906, now billed as Australian cricketers in Manchester and the San Francisco Italy in coloured animated photography", film of the were presented as programmes offered "a tour through first appeared at the Hall in April 1905. New novelties of Francis D. Sunderland were regular visitors after they The New Century Animated Pictures under the direction

ORHOFART BROS.,
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Dressing Room,
Ort deep and 200,
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This First-class and Up-to-date PICTURE SHOW
IN PERFECT CONDITION.

Over the next ten years a large number of companies played at the Hall. G. West and Son of Southsea presented pictures of *Our Navy* in January 1899 and again in 1902-3. These illustrated life on HMS *Crescent*, the ship of which the Duke of York was the captain. According to the *Manchester Evening News* the exhibition "raised the spectators to a high pitch of patriotic enthusiasm". This programme combined two subjects of popular patriotic fervour, the navy and the Royal Family. From May to July 1901 the large Hall was taken over by the English Viagraph Syndicate, who presented their entertainment locally shot films, including the visit of torpedo boats to Manchester, the arrival of General Buller at Central Railway Station and church processions and walks. Local interest films were by now a standard feature of visiting companies' programmes.

"somehow remarkable invention in the type of the Marvel Company's Analyticon, described as a presentation was shown in October. This was the Modern soon forthcoming and an early form of three-dimensional brought Captain Turner's Animated Sporting Pictures of clearly had considerable drawing power and August clearness and steadiness on the screen". Sporting events "Jubilee photograph - or animated pictures - thrown with Minstrel show in April, included Herr Rosenbergs' number of other films presented at the Hall. Sam Hague's The film returned later in the year, which also saw a

not been solved.
that the difficulties of reproducing them properly has a remarkable record of the event; but it is evident were not slow to appreciate. The pictures constitute occasional glimpses of smart boxing, which they the leading incidents of the encounter and it afforded The show gave them a fairly accurate impression of marked. Still the audience seemed to be satisfied. animated photographs was at times painfully vibration which seems as yet inseparable from combats became merely shadows when the rounds, but there were occasions when the very well, particularly the opening and closing disappointing. Some parts of the fight could be seen confessed that on the whole it was somewhat including the musical interludes and it must be The entertainment lasted an hour and a quarter reported 15,000 people. The *Manchester Evening News* reviewer on 18 January 1898, was less than enthusiastic.

Manchester Evening News (4 June 1901) was more favourable. Enormous audiences were reported while new films had been added. "Photographs of the Manchester Volunteers and the Whit-week Sunday school processions. The play *Joan of Arc* constituted capital entertainment. The pictures of the last mentioned play were brought to a conclusion in a most effective manner by Miss Grace Bowling singing "Jerusalem". The ability to significantly enhance the power of the visual images by the addition of the appropriate musical accompaniment (including the Besses-o-th'-Barn band and the Lancashire Military Band) was clearly appreciated even at this early stage. The company returned for the whole of October and November but there were problems: "The audience, or those in the front seats, are occasionally told what the pictures represent, but for long stretches pictures are flashed on the screen in helpless confusion without a word of explanation". (*Manchester Evening News* 2 October 1901.) Later reports indicate that improvements were made. Programmes included the pantomime *Red Riding Hood*, and films of the unveiling of the statue of Queen Victoria on Piccadilly, Manchester, by Earl Roberts, and the turnout of the Manchester Fire Brigade. A military band was again on hand for the company's final visit at the end of 1901 and prices were now 3d and 2s 0d, with two shows daily at 3pm and 8pm. From 10 February 1902 they moved into the Lesser Hall, where attractions included "Edison's new sensation - the Theatrephone". The Edison company closed for the last time at the Hall on 29 March 1902.

The Naval and Military Exhibition held at the Hall in January 1903 included "the American Biograph of realistic service pictures", and a Grand Military Bazaar in April 1904 also included the cinematograph. The New Century Animated Picture Company opened at the Hall on 19 April 1904 and ran their shows to early August. The bill included the usual films of local interest, the Whitsuntide processions and a royal visit to Liverpool, alongside such well-known fiction features as *The Great Train Robbery* and *A Trip to the Moon*. The Royal Canadian Company offered reserved seats at 3s 0d, 2s 0d and 1s 0d, 3,000 seats at 6d and 3,000 seats at 3d between June and August 1905. Clearly it was now appreciated that the bulk of the audience was at the lower end of the socio-economic scale. The company returned the following year when it presented its natural colour animated pictures in May and June. The advertisements then promised "an entertainment that stands alone on an impregnable rock of incontestability of perfection", all for 1s 0d, 6d or 3d. The last films shown at the Hall were those of the Prince Edward Pictures, from June to August 1907, which offered animated pictures supported by the "unseen actors (who sing behind the scenes), the only human talking pictures in the world".

In May 1906 the Hall and adjoining theatre were offered for sale at auction, but remained unsold. They were later purchased by the Calico Printers' Association. Various functions continued including the Manchester Dog Show in March 1908, and it was run as an "American Roller Skate Rink" from January to May 1909. In March of that year the Calico Printers' Association announced their intention of demolishing the Hall. This began in June 1909 and the new St. James's Building was erected on the site.

The St James's Theatre, despite being the location for one of the city's first film shows, was little used thereafter for this purpose. However the Edison company would occasionally move into the theatre if the Hall was in other



Children outside Art Picture Hall, Bury, 1911

use. The theatre closed on 21 September 1907, but reopened as the Pavilion Picture Theatre on 2 March 1908. Here audiences could see Ralph Pringle's North American Picture ("and smart vaudeville") Company, or listen to a "special engagement of the Auxeto gramophone on which items by Tetrizzini, Lauder, Melba, etc will be rendered". Closed for the summer the theatre again reopened on 14 September 1908, this time as the New Pavilion Picture Theatre, where visiting companies included Prince Edward's Human Talking Pictures.

The Grand

Most of the city centre theatres were used for the exhibition of films at one time or another, but the main venues were the Grand, Palace, Hippodrome and Tivoli. Chronologically The Grand in Peter Street was the first, with the Cinemascope being included on its variety programme for the week commencing 12 October 1896. From November 1902 firstly Edison's animated pictures and later the Grand Pictures and the Bioscope found a regular place on the bill. This theatre is identified by G.J. Mellor in his book *Picture Pioneers* as the city's first cinema from its reopening on 3 December 1906 by Jasper Redfern. Redfern was both a film-making and exhibition pioneer in his native Sheffield and operated a number of halls in South Yorkshire. At The Grand he instituted a policy of variety entertainment supported by a large number of animated pictures. The latter were reported as being "mostly of the humorous type, though there are also many interesting views" (*Manchester Courier*, 4 December 1906). Redfern, granted one of the city's first cinematograph licences in April 1910, continued this policy until he relinquished control in June 1913. The theatre was reopened in August 1913 by H. and A. Smith, and their first programme included the Grand Picturegraph. The Grand would later become a full-time cinema as the Palladium, the Peter Street Picture House and finally the Futurist. Jasper Redfern's touring company played at the Free Trade Hall in 1914, where he demonstrated his new interest, X-ray photography. Redfern joined the army at the outbreak of war and later worked for many years in Manchester as a radiologist, an occupation thought to have shortened his life.

Palace Theatre

The Palace Theatre of Varieties secured the services of Trewey's Lumiere Cinematographe for two weeks from

The reporter recorded the sense of wonder with which early shows were greeted when he observed that "several of the pictures were received with loud cheers and had to be exhibited again and again". (*Manchester Courier*, 24 December 1896). The theatre's pantomime that year, *Little Tich in Blue Beard*, included the O.S. Cinematograph, and "Edison's American Bioscope" appeared at a sixth anniversary performance on 28 May 1897. "Edison's latest wonder - the improved Projectoscope" was then installed from May to December, and included, in July, film of Queen Victoria's Jubilee procession. "The most perfect animated picture machine in the world" was brought to the theatre in the form of "Edison's latest wonder" (again), "the Columbia Bioscope" in July 1898. This run included film of busy scenes in Manchester, perhaps the first taken of the city,

Photographs of a variety of scenes in which men, women and children, horses, dogs, sheep and other animals are represented are displayed on a sheet in the centre of the stage and suddenly the figures begin to move and really seem as if they were alive. A scene in Piccadilly, London at midday was, it need hardly be said, a very moving one. Other scenes represented a flock of sheep being driven into a slaughter house, a fire brigade call, the arrival of a train at a station in France, a water shoot, a royal procession in London, Burmese jugglers, bathing in the Mediterranean and a change of life guards.

23 November 1896 by which time some new films had been introduced into the programme.

Handbill advertising "Cinema Entertainment"

A GRAND
CINEMA
Entertainment

WILL BE GIVEN AT THE

Every film shown is NON-INFLAMMABLE.

shown by the
**LATEST & MOST EXPENSIVE
MACHINE ON THE MARKET.**

The Entertainment is under the supervision of JIM MORTON, who is Chief Operator to the 3rd Corps, Grenade in France, under Lord Kitchener.

Two Hours' First-Class Show
and not one dull moment from start to finish.
We showed Pictures to the boys in France—NOW
LET US SHOW TO YOU!

(including the)
PRICES - 6d. 9d. 1/3

Doors open at 7. **Start 7-30**
J. Lynch & Son, Paradise Street Works, Acrofton.

Entertaining retailers also recognised the power of moving picture to attract customers. Lewis's store, Market Street, opened in 1880, included an exhibition hall at which "penny concerts" were held. It was at one such "concert" that the store, ever open to new methods of

Lewis's

Local showmen were quick to exploit the new novelty. In February 1897 the *Manchester Evening News* carried the following advertisement: "Cynematograph (sic) at liberty for schools, private parties, bazaars, etc - one to two hours entertainment - apply Brett, 9 Rosamond Place, Manchester". In October that year A. Franks, an optician with premises on Deansgate claimed to have "the best apparatus and largest stock of subjects in the North of England", and continued to advertise his availability until 1903. Messrs. Huntbach and Potts of 399 City Road advertised from 1899 to 1902, by which time they had added the Phonograph to their show, and H. Fuller of King Street advertised his animated pictures "electric or lime" from 1902.

The Tivoli theatre's first films were shown for two weeks in May 1898 by the Lanrier Cinematograph followed in January 1899 by the Edison-Rodgers Electrograph which featured reproductions of Manchester street scenes during its two week run. The year 1900 brought regular showings of Boer war films and in January 1901 the Royal Bioscope appeared for two weeks. Raymond's Viva-Graph was a part of the bill from October 1905 to February 1908, when Ruffell's Bioscope took over. A cinematograph licence was issued in 1910 to Arthur Bennett Wilkes. In the 1920s the theatre would become the Winter Garden cinema. By the time the Manchester Hippodrome, Oxford Street opened in December 1904 films were an essential part of the variety theatre programme and the Hippodrome's opening bill included the Bioscope. This would continue as a regular feature and in 1910 a cinematograph licence was issued to Oswald Stoll. The Comedy (later Gaiety) Theatre, Peter Street presented the Biograph at matinees for four weeks in 1897, but was not used for the showing of films again until it became a full-time cinema in 1921.

Tivoli

and Gladstone's funeral. From then until April 1901 the American Bioscope, Biograph and Gibbon's Bio Tablaux appeared frequently featuring items such as the Boer war and Queen Victoria's funeral. Gibbon's Phono Bio Tablaux in April 1901 offered talking pictures. "Miss Vestal Tillely will sing 'The Midnight Sun' and other songs; Miss Lill Hawthorn 'Kitty Mahone'; Turnout of the Fire Brigade - shouts of the crowd - clatter of the horsehoofs, etc; troops leaving Southampton - rush of steam - shriek of the whistle - shouts of the spectators; and numerous other funny subjects". However the first night had, unfortunately, to apologise for the late arrival of the machine and their inability to put it into operation" (*Manchester Evening News*, 2 April 1901.) Raymond's Viva-Graph, "the acme of animated photography", enjoyed a run which lasted from April 1901 until the following January, with items ranging from sporting events, local interest and comedies. Films were now firmly established as a regular part of the Palace's bill and licence was issued in respect of the theatre to Peter Watson in April 1910.

attracting customers, presented the Cinematographe in January 1897. Showing every half hour from noon to 7pm, the programme included the death scene from "Trilby"; rough sea at Blackpool; Chirgwin, the white-eyed Kaffir and Buffalo Bill. Cinematograph exhibitions became a regular feature at the store, and special runs of films of the Boer War (1900), the funeral of Queen Victoria (1901) and the Coronation procession (1902) featured alongside the more usual fare. A cinematograph licence was issued to Andrew Ellor, in respect of the store in 1910.

Patrons of the Saturday night concerts organised by the Wesleyan Mission at the Central Hall, Oldham Street, were certain to find uplifting and morally correct entertainment and from 1898 this would often include the cinematograph. For many years, from 1899, bank holidays (particularly Easter Monday) would bring Henry Hibbert, FRGS, of Bradford to the hall with his cinematograph and limelight pictures. Travelogues, such as *Swiss Scenes and their Story* and *With the King in Ireland* were supplemented by newsreels, humorous pictures, and songs and music. The hall continued to be used for occasional cinema shows, a licence being issued to the Rev. Samuel Francis Collier in 1910.

In 1895 Oscar Carre built a wooden structure on Great Bridgewater Street as a home for his Royal Netherland Circus. This later became the Royal English Circus and then Hengler's New Cirque. In October 1902 it was used by Ralph Pringle's North American Animated Photo Company, whose programme included Edward VII's coronation, *A Trip to the Moon* and *Pursuit of the Mad Mullah*. The Circus disappeared when the Hippodrome theatre was erected on the site, though parts of it may have been incorporated into the new building.

Arguably the most intriguing early cinema was that located at 93 Market Street. In the *Kine Weekly* of 26 June 1926, a correspondent remembered it well.

It is doubtful if it will ever be proved with certainty which was the first really permanent picture show in the Manchester district, but certainly the exhibition that was given in the cellar below what was known as the 'Musée of Mirth', on the site now occupied by the Market Street Picture House, was among the very first. Here one used to get a half-hour's show of perhaps two films for the modest 'tuppence', but it was always standing room only for the very simple reason that there were no seats, the audience being accommodated on a slanting platform. One kept a balance by leaning on the person in front. It is not surprising that this method of accommodation did not win a pleasant reputation for the pictures as a form of amusement.

The Manchester and Salford Mutoscope Company Ltd is listed in the Manchester Directory with premises at 43 Piccadilly (1899), 93a Market Street (1900) and 26 Peter Street (1901-2), after which it disappeared from the directories. The mutoscope was a peep-show machine launched early in 1897 and it is probably the films developed for use in these machines which were projected at the establishment on Market Street.

The YMCA building in Peter Street, despite being used for film shows in 1896, seems to have been little used after this date. It was demolished in 1908 and the new building, erected on the same site, was first granted a cinematograph licence in 1912. William Millward, later

associated with a number of cinemas in the Manchester area, opened his Elite Kinema Gallery at the building on 22 December 1913. This venture was seemingly not a success as it closed on 4 April 1914. After this the YMCA was used for short seasons of particular films.

The rising popularity of the cinema was shown by the Northern Kinematograph Exhibition, which was held at the City Exhibition Hall, Liverpool Road, in October 1913. This was open to the public from 3.30pm but earlier in the day renters and equipment suppliers could entertain exhibitors and other members of the trade at their stands. The admission fee of 6d entitled the general public to attend special picture theatres showing the latest films, take part in acting competitions, marvel at the Kinemacolor fashion gazette, shown for the first time in the provinces, or listen to Herr Wilhelm Piercy's famous orchestra.

Early issues of the trade journal *The Kinematograph Weekly*, which first appeared in 1907, carried lists of local fairs for the benefit of the touring showmen and also reported on their performances held in halls throughout the country. Within three years their use by the exhibition trade had declined rapidly and permanent cinemas were appearing in all corners of the land. Among the earliest in suburban Manchester established in 1908-10, were the Longsight Picture Palace on Stockport Road; the Labour Hall, Gorton; the Alhambra, Higher Openshaw; the New Temperance Hall, Newton Heath; the King's Hall, Hulme and the Imperial Picture Palace on Ashton Old Road. Such was the speed of the rise of the new medium that these first generation cinemas were quickly overtaken in standards of comfort and presentation and all had been closed by 1918. Typical was the Bijou opened toward the end of 1908 or early in 1909 by Harold Ride at the former Liberal Club in Hadfield Street, Ancoats. Rent for the hall was 14 shillings per week and other expenses covering the hire of gas engine and projector, and the operator's wage and the rental of films amounted to £10 per week. Admission was 2d for adults and 1d for children with two shows a night at 7pm and 9pm, times convenient for its working-class audience. All the seating was on hard wooden benches with programmes changed twice weekly, usually consisting of around ten short films. Unusually these shows featured no musical accompaniment as a music licence could not be obtained for the hall due to "unsatisfactory sanitary arrangements". Still the hall managed to attract a sizeable audience and patrons



Interior of Picture House, Manchester

than five years, did not close as a cinema until 1939 and was used for other purposes for a further 30 years. Converted buildings, amongst other shortcomings, often had flat floors and hence the sight lines to the screen were poor. As audiences became more discerning and their choice of cinemas grew, these halls found the going hard, relying on the poorer sections of the community for support, and many were forced to close.

The concentration of a large number of renters in Manchester, coupled with the large working-class population, the cinema's main audience, tempted many renters into the exhibition business, and this may explain in part the city's overabundance of cinemas. Notable early examples were Fred Rigg of the Progress Film Supply Company and the Victoria Picture Theatre, Ardwick; James Blakeley of the Arcadia Picture Palace, Levenshulme; and Walter Stott of the National Film Agency, who held the licence for the Chorlton Pavilion. Some renters even hired city centre halls to show particularly popular films before renting them to other exhibitors.

Modern Cinemas

The city centre's first true cinema was opened on 30 August 1910 by the growing national circuit Provincial Cinematograph Theatres Ltd (PCT), based in London. The company had only been registered in November of the previous year and this was one of their first cinemas. They had, however, already acquired a site for a second cinema in the city. The first site, The Picture House at 93 Market Street, would enjoy a long life under a number of owners and names, and was only closed as the result of a compulsory purchase order in 1974. This was not a purpose-built cinema, but adapted from existing premises on the ground floor of Palace Buildings, providing seating for 800. The takings from the opening days' performances, which started at 6.30pm, were donated to Ancoats Hospital, thereafter admission prices were 6d and 1s 0d, with children admitted at half price before 7pm, and performances continuous from 2pm to 10.30pm. The first licence was issued to manager Arthur Sharp, who was soon replaced by Adrian Romer.

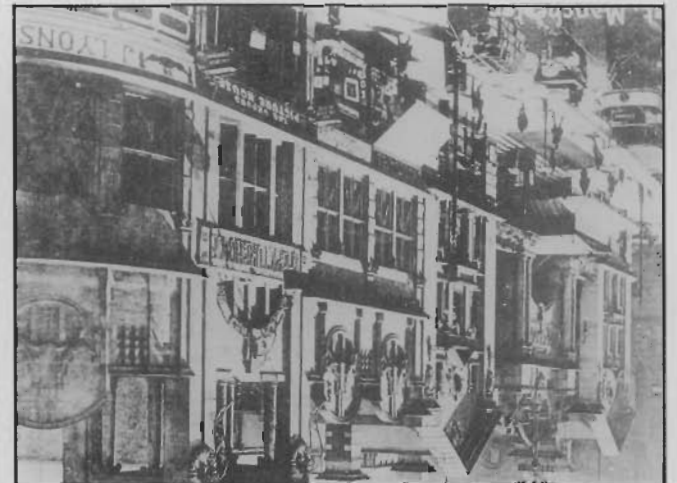
Romer also held the first licence issued for the company's second cinema in the city, The Picture House, Oxford Street. Both cinemas were designed by architect Naylor and Sale of Derby. The Oxford Picture House was far grander than its Market Street sister, a fact which the opening announcement emphasised: describing it as 'the largest and finest cinematograph theatre in the U.K.'. The formal opening on 15 December 1911 by the Lord Mayor of Manchester, included film of Scott's Antarctic expedition and was attended by the wife of the explorer. Reports described the hall as 'lofty, spacious and constructed on the most up-to-date lines', and it provided seating for 1,000 persons in stalls and a balcony. Another important point was emphasised: 'the flooring is on an incline and an excellent view of the screen is obtained from every part of the hall'. Other features included 'electric indicators installed in the Theatre and Entrance Lounge, in order that patrons may know which picture is appearing on the screen', and a parcel office where 'for the convenience of shoppers, parcels may be addressed to patrons care of the theatre, free of cost'. The licences for both cinemas passed to Kenneth T. Kirby in August 1913, while Adrian Romer went on to pastures new, as we shall see. The two cinemas remained part of the P.C.T. circuit

particularly appreciated the exploits of Broncho Billy and Nick Carter. It is not surprising that this was another early casualty, closing by March 1914.

On the 6 April 1910 the Manchester City Council granted 18 licences under the provisions of the 1909 Cinematograph Act, and during the remainder of the year a further 23 were issued. In addition to the sites already identified, licensed sites included theatres such as the Ardwick Empire, the Alhambra, Higher Openshaw, the King's, Longsight and the Hulme and Queen's Park Hippodromes; converted roller skating rinks such as the Arcadia, Levenshulme and the Coliseum, Ardwick and Belle Vue Gardens, which had featured a cinematograph gallery among its attractions since 1898. Among the recipients of the licences were some already well-known figures in the city's entertainment business such as brothers W.H. and P.B. Broadhead, who ran a chain of theatres in the city. Other licencees, who would grow to prominence in the city's cinema trade, included Herbert Douglas Moorhouse, later to run the H.D.M. cinema circuit; Bernard Rhodes; John Harrison and G.M. Montanini.

Financial success depended on bringing films to a mass audience and so by 1914, while the city centre had only four cinemas they were spread throughout the suburbs, with each district served by at least one. Working-class areas such as Gorton, Openshaw and Cheetham Hill close behind with five each, while more salubrious Didsbury and Withington could only accommodate one a piece. As noted by Rachael Low, in proportion to its population Manchester had more cinemas than any other provincial city. By the end of 1914 licencees had been issued in respect of 111 premises. Out of this total however 24 were theatres and other halls not in regular use as cinemas, eight had already closed and a further thirteen would be closed by 1920.

While the better class suburban hall compared favourably with those in the city centre, many were poor establishments, erected as cheaply as possible or converted like the Bijou from some other use. Converted Church and Mission halls were particularly common, while for the more adventurous entrepreneur GINGER, Lee and Company, 'practical builders' of Longsight offered composite buildings, usually of wood and corrugated iron, designed to conform with the requirements of the Cinematograph Act. One of these structures, licensed in Stockport in 1911 on condition that it not stand for more



The Picture House, Oxford Street, c.1914

until 1925, and the Oxford Picture House continued in use as a cinema until 1980.

The city centre's second cinema opened on 30 December 1910 and was located on Whitworth Street West, at the bottom of the approach to Oxford Road Railway Station. The Kinemacolor Palace was run by Manchester Electric Theatres Ltd of 30 Brown Street, with the first licence issued to the manager, Edward Bruce London. Weekly changes of colour films were offered in addition to the black and white films, which were changed twice a week. Advertised as being "well-warmed" and offering "comfortable tip-up seats" for 3d and 6d, performances were continuous from 2pm to 10.30pm. Seating was provided for about 500. The architect was Charles Swain of Exchange Street, who would later design picture houses in Stockport, Salford, Prestwich, Rawtenstall and Blackpool as well as Manchester's "theatre that never was", the planned New Queen's on Great Bridgewater Street. The company was soon in financial difficulties and in May 1911 the Natural Color Kinematograph Company Ltd presented a petition for bankruptcy against it at the Manchester County Court. A winding-up order followed in June and the theatre was sub-leased to the Development and Control Company Ltd of London. In January 1912 it was taken over by Philip E. Pope and Harry Maitland Storer of Buxton, who remained in control until the end of 1914. The cinema just survived its late conversion to talkies, closing early in 1933, after which it was turned into a furniture store. It was later re-converted to use as a cinema and is now known as Cornerhouse 1.

The final city centre cinema to open before World War One was the Deansgate Picture House and Cafe Rendezvous. This was opened on 15 January 1914 by the Lord Mayor of Manchester, and the first licence was held by the manager Adrian Romer. Reports described the entrance as being in "Jacobean style, panelled in oak with the higher walls lined with tapestries", and the auditorium

seated 870. It was run by the Alliance Cinematograph Company Ltd, initially based in London, but taken over by local interests in the following year. The architect was A.H. Stockwell of Newcastle Upon Tyne. Romer left in March 1914 and was replaced as manager by Trevor St John Beecher. The Cafe Rendezvous was later turned into a second auditorium. As the Cannon Twins it continued to operate right up until the present day. It was only in August 1990 that it too closed, bringing to an end a chapter in history of the Manchester's city-centre cinemas.

Further Reading

For those interested in the pre-history of the cinema such as the dioramas displayed by Harry H. Hamilton, the essential work is *The Archaeology of the Cinema* by C.W. Ceram. A general view of the period is provided by the first two books in the *History of the British Film* series. Volume One covering 1896-1906 is by Rachael Low and Roger Manvell and Volume Two covering 1906-14 is by Rachael Low. G.J. Mellor's *Picture Pioneers* gives a wide survey of cinema activities in the North of England, while *The Picture House* by Maryann Gomes of the North West Film Archive contains many interesting photographs and an overview of the region's cinematic history. The trade papers *Kine Weekly* and *The Bioscope* are useful, but their regional coverage only begins in depth toward the end of the period covered by this essay. Local sources other than those quoted above include the *Manchester Evening Chronicle* and city directories for the period. All are available in the Central Library in Manchester. The North West Film Archive based at Manchester Polytechnic contains much unpublished material, some in the form of tape-recorded interviews, and should be consulted by all serious students of the region's cinema history.

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