

# Flicker Alley: Cecil Court and the Emergence of the British Film Industry

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• Simon Brown

The early history of the British film industry is usually presented as the history of two activities, production and exhibition. After the 1978 FIAF congress raised awareness of early cinema, scholars first explored the nature of film language, then the history of film production, and more recent research by Nicholas Hiley, Luke McKernan, Richard Brown, Jon Burrows and Vanessa Toulmin has begun to focus upon film exhibition, from the town hall and travelling showmen to the penny gaffs and finally to the emergence of the big cinema companies like Electric Theatres and Provincial Cinematograph Theatres.<sup>1</sup> But the focus on these two sectors has channelled attention away from an understanding of the wider film industry, which during its first twenty years, in Britain as elsewhere, went from being a small scale, artisanal affair run by inventors and scientists to an entertainment industry run, albeit not exclusively, by businessmen, some of whom established large corporations like Pathé in France, or Walter Tyler Ltd in the UK. Little research has been done as yet on the rise of film distribution and rental in this period, and even less on suppliers of essential equipment, such as projectors, or on related businesses on the periphery of the film industry, such as the makers of tip-up seats, chocolate manufacturers, or makers of uniforms for ushers.<sup>2</sup>

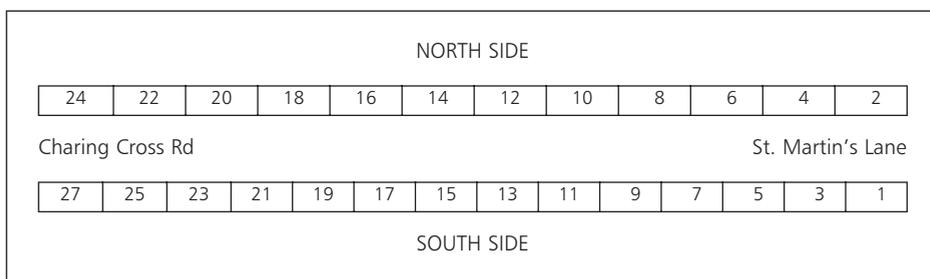
The hidden history of British film is the growing diversity and complexity of the film industry between 1895 and 1914. Such a vast unmapped field is beyond the scope of this essay, but focusing on the legendary heart of the early industry, Cecil Court, and on its changing cast of tenants, will address a number of myths about the early business and also clarify just

what was important about this rather quaint thoroughfare.

Cecil Court is a small pedestrian passageway in the London borough of Westminster, running between St Martin's Lane and Charing Cross Road. Today it is mostly the home of antiquarian booksellers, but it is considered to have been, in the first part of the twentieth century, the heart of London's film industry, earning the nickname of 'Flicker Alley'. Some of the most important names in early cinema had offices there, including Gaumont, Hepworth, Nordisk, Williamson, Globe, Tyler and Vitagraph. Its importance has been frequently cited by pioneer filmmakers and historians alike. Cecil Hepworth recalled that 'we rented a couple of shops in Cecil Court, which, because there was so many of us there, was becoming known as "Flicker Alley"'.<sup>3</sup> Denis Gifford, in his moving eulogy to Hepworth's great director Lewin Fitzhamon, was at pains to note he died at his home in Burleigh Mansions in Charing Cross Road, overlooking Cecil Court where he spent his happiest years.<sup>4</sup> Also Dave Aylott, a director for Williamson and Walturdaw, wrote an unpublished memoir, now housed in the Cataloguing Department of the British Film Institute, entitled *From Flicker Alley to Wardour Street*.

Thanks partly to first-hand accounts such as these, the importance of Flicker Alley to the early industry has been acknowledged without ever really being examined in detail. But the importance of Cecil Court is questionable, considering that the early years of cinema in Britain were characterised by the nationwide scope of the medium. The majority of the showmen who made film their stock in trade

- Cecil Court and the Emergence of the British Film Industry



• Fig. 1: Plan of Shop Numbers in Cecil Court

travelled the country, while regional areas such as Brighton, Blackburn, Sheffield, South Wales and Yorkshire quickly became important sites of film production. How then could one street in London occupy such an iconic place? This also begs the question as to when exactly Cecil Court became the centre of the film industry. Even within London, the business certainly did not begin in Cecil Court. R. W. Paul was based in Hatton Garden when he gave his first film shows at the Finsbury Technical College and Olympia, and all of the inventors who pioneered the development of the industry were based elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> The Warwick Trading Company, which under Charles Urban became one of the largest and dynamic early film companies, relocated in 1897 not to Cecil Court but to Warwick Court off High Holborn because, according to Urban, 'I noted that various firms dealing in Optical or Camera Goods were located along High Holborn and Oxford Street. I classified our business in the same category.'<sup>6</sup> If Urban identified High Holborn and Gray's Inn Road as the best place for a film business to make its home in 1897, why is Cecil Court considered to be so important? What made it so, and when?

The explanation lies in the economic theory of agglomeration. As Michael Ball and David Sunderland have pointed out in their *Economic History of London*, 'industries gain much from clustering together', becoming known as localisation economies.<sup>7</sup> There are various benefits for industries or businesses that cluster. There is the advantage of the sharing of information, both in terms of assessing market

trends, and in terms of product development. For a technical and inventor-led business such as film, advances in lens or lamp design for projectors could benefit the work of other inventors, and geographical closeness assisted the flow of information and ideas. Another advantage was in terms of standardising market exchange, since the rapid development of the film industry required new methods of transacting business. In this respect agglomeration can ensure that 'firms, workers and suppliers know, and are accustomed to, the ways in which business is conducted'.<sup>8</sup>

Michael Chanan noted that 'Cecil Court became the site of the first *concentration of film businesses* in one location' [my emphasis],<sup>9</sup> and through this concentration it became the site for the localisation economy of the film trade. Significantly the companies that moved into Cecil Court were almost exclusively new film companies which grew up within the emerging film industry, as opposed to the Holborn companies which were already in existence and which adapted. For example alongside Paul in Hatton Garden were apparatus manufacturers E. P. Allam and Co. and lens makers Perkin Son and Co. Not far away in Gray's Inn Road were John Wrench and Son, makers of cameras and projectors. All of these turned to making film equipment, but none moved out of their premises into Cecil Court because they already had existing networks of like-minded businesses around them. Moreover, being established they required more space than the small cramped buildings in Cecil Court were able

to offer, which were eminently suitable for the small business, but not for larger concerns.

The agglomeration and the movement of companies in and out of Cecil Court, as well as the expansion of companies into adjacent premises, therefore offers an indication of which businesses were starting up and which were growing. From this we can discern patterns of development within the industry, principally which types of businesses were in the process of consolidation and which were beginning to develop at any one time. Businesses and types of businesses move in around each other in order to share information, products, resources and clientele. Once a business or type of business is fully established and self-sufficient, the necessity of such agglomeration begins to recede in favour of more autonomy. Similarly, a shift in the market can lead to a shift in agglomeration. As new types of businesses develop due to market forces, they too agglomerate for the same reasons. The arrival and departure of the companies in Cecil Court can therefore provide us with a graph of the changing pattern of the industry.

This study represents an attempt to address the early film industry in London in historio-economic terms, an approach which Richard Brown and Barry Anthony have argued is comprehensively needed in relation to the early history of the film industry in Britain.<sup>10</sup> As they rightly observe, the traditional view is that the early film pioneers were disorganized, the business rudimentary, and it was by way of technical innovation that the industry matured and grew. This, they suggest, represents a mythologizing of the pioneer which is typical of attitudes towards Victorian ideology. To counter it, they argue that a more accurate explanation for the rapid growth of the film business must address the fact that the film industry grew through the business acumen and experience of those men who entered it, rather than through the technology of those already in it. It was, they claim, 'the application of commercial skills brought in, rather than the nature of the products pushed out, that determined both structure and speed of development'.<sup>11</sup>

The history of the early cinema business is therefore split between a romantic myth of origins, and the more hard-nosed approach of commerce, between technological achievement and management know-how. Cecil Court represents a location where these conflicting ideas can meet and be explored. Here is a street that is seen at the same time as the mythic birthplace, commercial centre, and romantic heart of the early British film industry. As such, its development during the first twenty years of that industry offers a microcosmic case study of the changes in that industry and in the people and companies who forged it.

### **The Early Years, 1897–1907**

The mythic status of Cecil Court as the home of early British film masks that fact that it took eight years from Paul's first film show in London in 1896 for more than two film companies to be simultaneously in business in Cecil Court, and two further years after that for more than three to arrive. Moreover, by the time the industry was finally settling there around 1907 and 1908, Gaumont, the pioneer company that had been there longest, had left Cecil Court, having outgrown its premises and joined other larger concerns already settled elsewhere. These included the Charles Urban Trading Company, which Urban had started in Rupert Street in 1903, before moving in March 1908 to the splendid Urbanora House in Wardour Street. As Luke McKernan has pointed out, 'in doing so Urban became the first filmmaker to move to the street that was soon to become the home of the British film industry'. So only the year after Cecil Court really took off in terms of attracting film businesses to its premises, the industry was already on the move into Soho.<sup>12</sup> In 1909 Will Barker opened Film House in Gerrard Street which quickly became the home for a large number of Edwardian film companies, including Cricks and Martin, Cosmopolitan Film Company, Tyler Film Company and the Gerrard Film Company.

In fact the converging paths of Cecil Court and the infant film industry began with a false start.

**Table 1:** List of Companies in Cecil Court, 1899–1907

Address	1897	1899	1900	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906
2	Biograph								
3									New Bioscope Co
4	Biograph								
5							New Bioscope Co	New Bioscope Co	New Bioscope Co
15									Hepworth Mfg Co
17					Hepworth and Co	Hepworth and Co	Hepworth Mfg Co Ltd	Hepworth Mfg Co Ltd	Hepworth Mfg Co Ltd
22	Hepworth				Gaumont	Gaumont	Gaumont	Gaumont	Gaumont
23									Gaumont
25		Gaumont	Gaumont	Gaumont	Gaumont	Gaumont	Gaumont	Gaumont	Gaumont
27							Gaumont	Gaumont	Gaumont

Sources: *The Post Office London Street Directories, 1897–1906; The Era, The Showman, The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly, The Bioscope*, Individual companies' Board of Trade Files in the National Archives.

The first film company to take offices in Cecil Court was the British Mutoscope and Biograph Company (hereafter Biograph) in 1897. Biograph was a licensee of the larger American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, run by one of American Biograph's founders, Elias Bernard Koopmann, who relocated to London as managing director. He arrived in January 1897 and by February had struck a deal with the Palace Theatre in Cambridge Circus to show Biograph films.<sup>13</sup> Exactly when the company moved into their offices at numbers 2 and 4 Cecil Court is unclear, but they remained for less than a year, removing to Great Windmill Street in November.<sup>14</sup> Also unclear is quite why Biograph chose Cecil Court as their initial home. Received wisdom suggests that the street was widely associated with the photographic business, but the evidence suggests otherwise. In fact, when Biograph arrived only two photographic businesses were operating in Cecil Court. The editorial office of the *Photographic News* was at no. 9, whilst at no. 22 Cecil Hepworth had set up a shop with his cousin Monty Wicks selling cameras and dry plates. Hepworth's business was a short-lived affair: as he noted dryly, he and Wicks 'waited for custom – which never came'.<sup>15</sup> In fact, the cousins abandoned the business at the beginning

of 1898 to go and work for Charles Urban at nearby Warwick Court, while no. 22 was taken over by a grindery dealer. The *Photographic News* also left, so that after a brief flurry of activity, 1898 saw the film and photographic business leave Cecil Court completely.

It was Alfred Bromhead and Gaumont that became the first significant resident of Cecil Court working with film. Gaumont had set up a British agency in 1897 under the elderly John Le Couteur, for whom Bromhead and his brother went to work. The following year Bromhead took over, and the company moved to no. 25 Cecil Court in 1899, where it remained the sole film company until the beginning of 1902. Acting as agent for its French parent, Gaumont quickly established itself as a sales agent for other companies, including Lumière and Hepworth and Co, which Hepworth had set up in early 1899 after a summary dismissal from The Warwick Trading Company. Hepworth and Co was a small firm consisting of just Hepworth and Wicks, and had no central sales office. Hepworth was an inventor and showman rather than a salesman, so he signed an agency agreement with Gaumont to represent his films. It was agreed with Bromhead that Gaumont would represent Hepworth and Co for three years, and that in

addition they would retain the right to sell the films themselves directly.<sup>16</sup> Hepworth also struck a similar deal around the same time with the Warwick Trading Company, like Gaumont, a larger company than his with a much higher profile in the trade, and already acting as agent for both Lumière and Méliès.<sup>17</sup> Neither agency deal lasted. Hepworth terminated the agreement with Gaumont and Warwick at the end of 1901, opening his own office in Cecil Court in January 1902 at number 17.<sup>18</sup> The same year Gaumont took another office on the North side of the street, at number 22. Both Gaumont and Hepworth used their Cecil Court offices as sales premises for their films and for cameras, projectors and various other sundry appliances, whilst Hepworth, like Bromhead, built a fully equipped screening room in the basement, where any of the 300 films which he had in stock could be projected for potential clients.<sup>19</sup>

Hepworth probably moved back into Cecil Court in 1902 because he was familiar with the street, and because Gaumont was there, with whom he had had a working relationship. Despite the distribution contract ending, there were established links between the two businesses, and a mutual respect between Bromhead and Hepworth. Gaumont was the more established business in terms of both organisation and clientele, with the large French company behind it, but both Gaumont and Hepworth were in many ways at a similar stage of development. Both their premises were designed to act as 'one-stop-shops' for the cinema trade. In 1902 *The Showman* described Hepworth's aim as 'to be a complete cinematograph and outfit supply store', stocking 'all the different makes of machine'.<sup>20</sup> Hepworth noted in his autobiography that he sold 'projectors, resistances and accessories (and) my original arc-lamp';<sup>21</sup> while an advertisement in *The Era* from 1904 listed 'films of any subject, cameras, projectors, lamps, resistances, motors, measurers, winders and all accessories'.<sup>22</sup> In addition to his own inventions, Hepworth sold equipment by Alfred Wrench, who was a shareholder in his company from 1904.<sup>23</sup> Gaumont under Bromhead also sold 'cameras,

film stock, negative and positive, and every kind of article necessary for the various purposes of the trade'.<sup>24</sup> In this respect they resembled the other major force in the film business in 1900, the Warwick Trading Company, which also manufactured and traded in films and equipment.

Potential clients for Gaumont and Hepworth, wishing to visit and discuss business, could see both in one place. Hepworth saw that although Walton on Thames was a good base for filmmaking, it was impractical for the sales side of his business. He announced that the move to London took place 'owing to the great increase in our business and the necessity for quicker and more direct communication with our customers'.<sup>25</sup> These same customers would be visiting both Gaumont and Warwick. Most showmen would have to travel considerable distances to visit London, and almost all were buying their films from many producers, so agglomeration proved a benefit both to the showmen, and to their suppliers, who did not lose business because they were geographically distant from their colleagues. Even to the London film exhibition venues this was a benefit, not only for purchasing but also for collection of merchandise.

The most common means of transport for film prints around London, apart from parcel post, was either by cab or on foot, so collecting multiple reels from one location was a considerable advantage. Even films being sent by rail had to be taken to the stations, and this was either done by external porters, cab drivers, or casual employees. As Ball and Sunderland have pointed out:

many poor people would end up in low paid jobs delivering messages or running errands (or) carrying loads through the streets. Cheapness of this labour encouraged London service firms to proliferate, so cabs permanently on hand and large numbers of messengers waiting were not uncommon.<sup>26</sup>

It is reasonable to speculate that Gaumont and Hepworth, having sold films to the same showmen, may have packaged their reels together and split the transportation costs.

In 1904 Gaumont expanded on the south side of Cecil Court, taking over the adjacent shops at nos. 23 and 27, while still maintaining their north side premises at no. 22. Also in 1904 the New Bioscope Company moved into Cecil Court at no. 5. Unlike Hepworth and Gaumont, New Bioscope did not trade in films but instead concentrated on apparatus, under their managing director Frederick Richard Griffiths. In 1906 they expanded into the adjacent premises at no. 3, while Hepworth also spread out next door into no. 15. By this point, of the four firms (including Biograph) who operated from Cecil Court, three were film producers.<sup>27</sup> Only New Bioscope dealt exclusively in apparatus and did not produce their own films, but like Hepworth and Gaumont, they traded in apparatus from many different makers, and so in this respect also resembled a 'one-stop shop'.

The film business began as an offshoot of the photographic and scientific instrument industry, based in Hatton Garden and Gray's Inn Road. By contrast, the businesses opening their doors in Cecil Court represented the first phase of an independent and autonomous film industry, whose initial growth pattern was of businesses which became 'one-stop shops' revolving mostly around dealership in both films and equipment, and therefore acting, as Hepworth advertised, as 'cinematograph supply stores' These new companies were developing into medium to large-scale enterprises which acted as wholesalers of films and hardware, from projectors to film winders. In this respect they were non-specialised businesses offering a full and comprehensive product range to their clients.

From three film-related companies in 1906, the total more than doubled to seven the following year. Significantly, in 1906 Gaumont moved to larger premises in Sherwood Street. It had expanded beyond the capacity of the small shop fronts and cramped basements, and was looking towards further expansion through diversification into the emerging field of film rental and the opening of branch offices around the country. Gaumont's departure vacated four premises in Cecil Court which, instead of being occupied *en bloc* by one large company, were individually taken by smaller concerns, and these were small

and specialised rather than consolidated like Gaumont. They represented a new wave of film businesses, very different from the pioneer firms of Gaumont and Hepworth.

### 1907–1911: The New Wave

The four premises which Gaumont vacated were taken over by the Cinematograph Syndicate at no. 23, Leo Kamm and Co at no. 25, and James Williamson and Co at no. 27. On the north side, no. 22 was occupied by a tailor, but Vitagraph moved into no. 10. Williamson's premises were the most similar to the one-stop shop cinema supply store model of Hepworth and Gaumont, his Cecil Court offices being a London base for the sale of equipment and films. But the other companies were different. Leo Kamm, like New Bioscope, dealt in equipment. This was an established business, founded in 1892, which had turned to the manufacture of projectors and cameras. The Cecil Court offices were central sales offices for equipment made at their factory in Goswell Road in Finsbury. As such, Kamm was the highest profile maker of hardware to open an office in Cecil Court, in terms of an 'agglomeration' alignment with the burgeoning film industry, rather than the inventor and equipment industry represented by Paul and Wrench in Holborn. The other two companies both dealt only in films. The Cinematograph Syndicate produced film subjects under the Norwood brand, while Vitagraph's London office was specifically for the sale of Vitagraph subjects imported from the USA.<sup>28</sup>

If the companies in Cecil Court up to the end of 1906 can be considered representative of the first wave of the film industry, a radical shift in what constituted that industry occurred between 1907 and 1908. Table 3 shows the main trades of the film companies in Cecil Court between 1906 and 1910.<sup>29</sup>

As the one-stop shop companies consolidated and Gaumont moved out, the new businesses moving in represented three new business areas, which were foreign film sales, the supply of equipment and furnishings for cinemas, and film rental. In 1907 Vitagraph was the first of a new

**Table 2:** Film Businesses in Cecil Court between 1907–1911

No.	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911
1		New Bioscope Trading Co	New Bioscope Trading Co Ltd	New Bioscope Trading Co Ltd	New Bioscope Trading Co Ltd
3	New Bioscope Co	New Bioscope Trading Co	New Bioscope Trading Co Ltd	New Bioscope Trading Co Ltd	New Bioscope Trading Co Ltd
5	New Bioscope Co	New Bioscope Trading Co	New Bioscope Trading Co Ltd	New Bioscope Trading Co Ltd	New Bioscope Trading Co Ltd
6			Central Electric Co	Central Electric Co	New Kinematograph Enterprises Ltd
8			Globe Film Co Ltd		Biograph Theatres Ltd
10	Vitagraph Company of America	F. A. Fullager and Co	Precision Film Co	Rosie Film Co	
13			Paragon Bioscope Co Ltd	Paragon Bioscope Co Ltd	Mansell Ltd
15	Hepworth Mfg Co Ltd	Hepworth Mfg Co Ltd	Hepworth Mfg Co Ltd	Globe Film Co Ltd	Vitagraph Co of America
17	Hepworth Mfg Co Ltd	Hepworth Mfg. Co Ltd	Hepworth Mfg. Co Ltd	Globe Film Co Ltd	Vitagraph Co of America
18		Nordisk Films Co	Nordisk Films Co	Nordisk Films Co	Theatre Chocolate Co Ltd
19				Tyler Apparatus Co	American Film Releases (aka Richard Edmonson, Film Agent)
20		Graham and Latham	Graham and Latham		Cinema Halles Ltd
21	Graham and Latham				
22			Graham and Latham		
23	Cinematograph Syndicate	Cinematograph Syndicate	International Film Bureau Ltd	Films Ltd	Films Ltd
25	L. Kamm and Co Ltd	Vitagraph Co of America	Vitagraph Co of America	Vitagraph Co of America	Nordisk Films Co
27	James Williamson and Co	Williamson Dressler and Co	Williamson Dressler and Co	Williamson Dressler and Co	

Sources: *The Post Office London Street Directories, 1907–1912*; *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly, The Bioscope*, Board of Trade Files in the National Archives, *The Bioscope Annual and Trades Directories 1910–1912*.

breed of specialised dealers in the import and distribution of foreign films. At the same time, at no. 21, John Watkins, a bookseller who had been in Cecil Court since at least 1904, leased part of his upstairs premises to Graham and Latham, who were makers of sights for rifles. In 1908 they took their own offices at no. 20, and the year, they began to advertise their new product, electric target rifle ranges, in the *Bioscope* as an added attraction for the new electric picture palaces.<sup>30</sup>

1908 saw the arrival at no. 18 Cecil Court of the Danish company Nordisk Films Co, under its dynamic director Ole Olsen. Like Vitagraph, Nordisk was acting as a foreign sale office for the successful product of their parent company, which had only been founded two years before. It had already expanded into international sales in Sweden, Norway, Germany and Italy, and Great Britain was part of its second wave of expansion.<sup>31</sup> At no. 6, the Central Electric Company, which had been formed in December

- Cecil Court and the Emergence of the British Film Industry

**Table 3:** Types of Film Business in Cecil Court 1906–1910

Type of Business	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911
Film and Equipment Dealer and Manufacturer/producer	2 (H,G)	2 (H,W)	1 (H)	1 (H)		
Film and Equipment Dealer and Manufacturer/producer and Renter			1 (WD)	1 (WD)		
Film Dealer and Producer		1 (CS)	1 (CS)	1 (PRE)	1 (JR)	
Equipment Manufacturer and supplier	1 (NB)	2 (NB, LK)			1 (TY)	
Equipment Manufacturer and supplier/Renter			1 (NB)	2 (NB, GLO)	3 (NB, GLO, WD)	3 (NB, NKE, CH)
Renter (of films and complete outfits)			1 (FAF)	1 (PAR)	2 (PAR, FL)	1 (FL)
Manufacturer or supplier of goods or services for cinemas		1 (GL)	2 (GL, CE)	2 (GL, CE)	1 (CE)	2 (M, TC)
UK representative for Foreign Company		1 (V)	2 (V, N)	2 (V, N)	2 (V, N)	3 (V, N, AFR)
Film Import/Export Dealing				1 (IFB)		
Cinema Owners						1 (BT)
TOTAL	3	7	9	11	10	10

Key:

AFR: American Film Releases, BT: Biograph Theatres Ltd, CE: Central Electric Co, CH: Cinema Halles Ltd, CS: Cinematograph Syndicate, FAF: F. A. Fullager and Co, FL: Films Ltd, G: Gaumont, GL: Graham and Latham, GLO: Globe Film Company Ltd, H: Hepworth Manufacturing Company Ltd, IFB: International Film Bureau Ltd, JR: Joe Rosenthal/Rosie, LK: Leo Kamm and Co Ltd, M: Mansell, Ltd, Electrical Engineers, N: Nordisk Films Co, NB: New Bioscope (Trading) Company (Ltd), NKE: New Kinemograph Enterprises Ltd, PAR: Paragon Bioscope Co Ltd, PRE: Precision Film Co, TC: Theatre Chocolate Co Ltd, TY: Tyler Apparatus Co, V: Vitagraph Company of America, W: James Williamson and Co, WD: Williamson Dressler C

1891, had become by 1908 engineers and manufacturers of electric signs. By 1909, like Graham and Latham, they would be advertising their services to cinema owners, offering electrical installation and signage for new cinemas.

The third strand was rental. In February 1908 the *Kine Weekly* wrote that renting firms were growing in influence and 'at the present time occupy one of the most important positions in the kinematograph world', while at the same time acknowledging that the growth of rental 'has not been attended by anything like a proportionate increase in the number of firms making the hiring of films the main part of their business'.<sup>32</sup> In the following month the New Bioscope Trading Co announced in the *Kine Weekly* that it had films for hire.<sup>33</sup> With this move into rental, New Bioscope was reorganised

as the New Bioscope Trading Co Ltd and expanded into a third shop occupying nos 1 to 5. Moving into Cecil Court at no. 10 soon after, F. A. Fullager and Co became the first of a new breed of companies which specialised exclusively in film rental, unlike New Bioscope who were adding rental to equipment sales. Also in 1908, Williamson stopped relying on production and re-organised his company into Williamson Dressler and Co Ltd. Williamson's company made a deal with their US representatives, E. Dressler Co who also represented Cines and Selig in America. The new company took on world sales rights for Williamson films, as well as UK and US rights for Cines and European rights for Selig.

1909 not only saw Graham and Latham and Central Electric start advertising their services to the film trade, but also marked the arrival of four new film companies in Cecil Court: Paragon

Bioscope Company at no. 13, International Film Bureau Ltd at no. 23 (taking over from the Cinematograph Syndicate), The Precision Film Company at no. 10, and The Globe Film Company at no. 8. Of these, Precision was a film producer, while Paragon and Globe were renters and exhibitors, Globe having started to advertise its move into rental only two weeks after New Bioscope.<sup>34</sup> Less is known about the International Film Bureau, except that they were probably a sales agent or import/export company, and they were gone by 1910. So too was Precision Film Company, which was already foundering, and moved back to Whipp's Cross before being dissolved in 1916. Their premises were taken by another production company, Joe Rosenthal's Rosie Film Company, whose studio was in Croydon. New arrivals in Cecil Court in 1910 were the Liverpool-based renting firm Films Ltd, opening their London branch office at no. 23, and the newly formed Tyler Apparatus Co. This was an offshoot of Walter Tyler Ltd, set up in 1910 to specifically deal with the sale of cameras, projectors and accessories.<sup>35</sup>

Although Films Ltd and Tyler Apparatus were offshoots of established businesses, and Rosenthal had been in the industry for many years as a cameraman, these were all new enterprises. Rosie and Tyler Apparatus were new companies, while Films Ltd were opening a new branch office. Cecil Court therefore remained consistent as the centre for new film companies, which continued the agglomeration processes started by the first wave several years earlier, although the services offered by these businesses were very different. By 1910 film production and film sales had all but left Cecil Court. Films Ltd and Paragon both dealt exclusively with film rental, equipment dealing being part of their hire service. They offered not just films but also complete outfits (films plus a projector and projectionist) on short or long-term hire. This distinguished them from New Bioscope, Globe and Williamson Dressler, all renters who also manufactured or sold equipment. Tyler Apparatus Co sold equipment exclusively. Hepworth had hung on until August 1910, when he moved to 2 Denman Street, and Globe



• Plaque marking the rebuilding of Cecil Court, originally a 17th century thoroughfare, in its modern form.

consolidated their position by expanding into Hepworth's premises at nos 15 and 17. With the departure of Hepworth, the last of the first wave of pioneer companies left Cecil Court. Only one company left in Cecil Court produced films, Rosie, and this they did exclusively, rather than additionally trading in equipment as Hepworth and Gaumont had before them.

By 1910, therefore, the one-stop shop film and equipment producers and dealers had all left Cecil Court.<sup>36</sup> They had outgrown Flicker Alley and expanded into newer premises. Gaumont had moved to Sherwood Street and Hepworth to Denman Street, both of which were adjacent streets in Soho, not far from Urbanora House and Gerrard Street where producers like Cricks and Martin, Clarendon, Barker and Urban were agglomerating. This, too, was to their benefit. By 1909 the producers, who had for the last four years been using the on-approval method of film

sales which placed the majority of the financial burden of sales upon themselves, were adopting a policy of forcing intending purchasers to come to them. Taking advantage of this centralisation of offices and of screening facilities which resulted from agglomeration, they began to screen their products for showmen upon request, and it was up to the showmen to come to London to see them. This approach redressed the balance by sharing the cost of sales. Under the on-approval system the manufacturer had to pay to make a print and to ship it. If the showman did not want it, the manufacturer had to pay to have it sent back, while if the showman did want it, the burden fell upon the manufacturer to obtain payment. All of these problems made on-approval a potential minefield of litigation, so much so that the *Kine Weekly* actually ran an article offering legal advice about the system.<sup>37</sup> The new system shared the cost, with the showmen paying their own travel costs, while the manufacturer paid for a print, but the advantage had shifted in favour of the manufacturer. They only had to make one print of a film instead of many, since they needed only one print in their screening room, and although they had the overhead of running the projector, this could be done by a member of staff. Some companies went further, not offering to screen films on request but 'appointing, instead, a certain day of the week on which all their new films may be seen at their headquarters'.<sup>38</sup> In 1909 at Film House in Gerrard Street, screenings took place every Tuesday of the new films by five companies, Anglo-American, Cosmopolitan, Cricks and Martin, Lux, Itala and Éclair.<sup>39</sup> These companies shared both premises and the cost of the projection room and the projectionists, lowering the costs of selling even further. Travelling to London for showmen became more commonplace. By 1910, the Bedford Head Hotel was advertising in the *Bioscope* as the most central and convenient accommodation for film buyers visiting London.<sup>40</sup>

What had come to Cecil Court in place of the film and equipment makers and suppliers were more specialised firms. By 1910 the principal business in Cecil Court was film rental, with half

of the businesses working in this field. Four companies sold equipment, two were sales agents, while one was a producer and one a manufacturer of accessories for cinemas. If agglomeration benefited companies that were smaller and entering into new areas of business, then we can see from the pattern in Cecil Court that the new industry was represented by rental and equipment sales.

This pattern continued into 1911. Globe and Williamson Dressler moved out and in came New Kinematograph Enterprises Ltd and Cinema Halles. The former was founded by Frederick Griffiths, formerly of New Bioscope, and like Globe, who had moved to larger premises in Shaftsbury Avenue, they were renters who dealt in equipment. Cinema Halles was also a renter and equipment dealer, which had originally been the Alhambra Bioscope Company Ltd, founded by George Harry John Dawson, who had previously been on the board of Walturdaw. In terms of cinema equipment, Central Electric Co moved out to Newington Butts and Mansell Ltd, who were also electrical engineers, moved in. Also the short-lived Theatre Chocolate Co opened at no. 18, selling chocolates to cinemas, which by 1911 was becoming a popular business with eight companies all advertising in the *Bioscope Annual* for 1910–11, including Nestle and Peek Frean.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps most significantly, Joe Rosenthal moved out, and no further film producers moved into Cecil Court before the First World War. He was replaced by another agent for foreign companies, American Film Releases under Richard Edmondson, the first of the new breed of agents to take offices in Cecil Court. Unlike Vitagraph and Nordisk, this was not a branch office for a foreign company, but rather a British based company acting as UK and European agents for a number of American firms including Atlas and Comet.

At the end of 1911 therefore, the film industry in Flicker Alley consisted of four renters, two firms supplying equipment for cinemas, one cinema building company, and three sales agents. The last of the producers and equipment dealers, Rosie and Tyler Apparatus Co had moved out, and there was one less rental firm than

1910, as rental became more established. The intervening year saw a rise in the number of agents, and the number of companies dealing with cinema buildings and furnishings. Of the ten companies in 1911, only four had been in Cecil Court the previous year; New Bioscope, Nordisk, Vitagraph and Films Ltd. The rest were new to Cecil Court, and also new companies, Biograph Theatres being the oldest, having been formed in 1908. The majority who left had done so because they had consolidated and were in the process of expansion. Flicker Alley is therefore a microcosm for the development of the film industry; the comings and goings on the street representing the emergence of newer and smaller companies in new fields which agglomerated as the larger and older ones moved out.

The myth of Flicker Alley, as recounted by Aylott, Gifford and Hepworth, is bound up with film production. What the actual history of Cecil Court tells us is that the story of the British film industry is far more complex. Of the 26 companies identified as having premises in Cecil Court up to 1911,<sup>42</sup> only 6 produced films,<sup>43</sup> while ten dealt in equipment.<sup>44</sup> All of these companies were British to a greater or lesser degree, either British registered or British funded, or run by British businessmen, but it seems clear that for all its reputation Cecil Court was not where the film industry began, and was never the actual heart of British film production or exhibition. Ironically, this was mainly because, as production companies like Gaumont and Hepworth grew, they moved out, while bigger concerns established elsewhere like Urban and Barker were too big to move in, as indeed were the cinema construction companies.

The place of Flicker Alley in early British cinema is therefore tied less to historical fact than to the myth of the 'gentleman pioneer' filmmaker. Its very nickname has quaintness, an old world quality, which suggests that its inhabitants were small artisanal enterprises. This they were, but few were pioneer producers, and so Hepworth's claim that 'there were so many of us there' could be misremembrance, but is more likely due to the deliberate bias of his memoir which paints him as a gentleman and an amateur. By the time he

wrote *Came the Dawn*, Hepworth promoted a retrospective picture of his company's outlook as being one of unchanging simplicity, an image of early cinema which is still perpetuated. He suggested that the filmmaking world changed very little in the 25 years he was in business and declared in 1924 that he worked in exactly the same way as he did in 1906, except for the fact that the films were longer.<sup>45</sup> The image was of a community of craftsman and artisans who worked outside the bounds of industrialisation. Alongside this, his reminiscences suggest he was one of a number of gentleman filmmakers, amateurs succeeding through luck and good fortune. Hepworth was not alone in this. As Richard Brown and Barry Anthony have pointed out, 'film pioneers in their later reminiscences assiduously cultivated the impression that the early days were rudimentary and disorganised'.<sup>46</sup> They also note that 'most [memoirs] prove to be overlaid with a depressingly similar formulaic pattern of myth creation'.<sup>47</sup> Flicker Alley has been caught up in this process of nostalgia and myth creation.

If Flicker Alley was not the literal home of the pioneer industry, it was the heart of what was new in the British film industry, attracting young companies who clustered together to learn from one another. The history of early British cinema has for too long been couched in terms of failure. Sadoul referred to 'stagnation britannique, as did Rachael Low.<sup>48</sup> Charles Barr accused the pioneers of being 'exhausted' by 1909, while James Park charged British film with 'beginning behind'.<sup>49</sup> Although British film production undoubtedly ran into serious problems around 1909, the wider film industry was vibrant, diversifying, expanding, and spawning new and very different trades and companies year by year. Far from being the quaint home of the gentleman pioneers, it was to this industry that Flicker Alley was home.

### Acknowledgements

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- Cecil Court and the Emergence of the British Film Industry

## Notes

- 1 See for example Nicholas Hiley, 'At the Picture Palace: The British Cinema Audience, 1895–1920 in John Fullerton, ed., *Celebrating 1895*, John Libbey, 1998, pp. 96–103 and "'Nothing More than a Craze": Cinema Building in Britain from 1909 to 1914', in Andrew Higson, ed., *Young and Innocent? The Cinema in Britain 1896–1930*, Exeter University Press, 2002, pp. 111–127; Jon Burrows, 'Penny Pleasures: Film Exhibition in London during the Nickelodeon Era, 1906–1914', *Film History*, vol., 16, no. 1, 2004, pp. 60–91; Richard Brown, 'New Century Pictures: Regional Enterprise in Early British Film Exhibition', in V. Toulmin, S. Pople and P. Russell, eds., *The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon: Edwardian Britain on Film*, British Film Institute, 2004, pp. 69–82.
- 2 The London Project at Birkbeck College, part of the AHRB Centre for British Film and Television Studies, has established a searchable database of film-related businesses in London between 1895–1914. See <http://londonfilm.bbk.ac.uk>.
- 3 Cecil Hepworth, *Came the Dawn*, Phoenix House, 1951, p. 64.
- 4 Denis Gifford, typed obituary for Lewin Fitzhamon, box 135, item 4, Denis Gifford Collection, BF1 Special Collections.
- 5 See John Barnes' five volume history of the first few years of British film for details of the pioneers involved. Barnes lists addresses for almost all of the businesses he covers, none of which are in Cecil Court.
- 6 Charles Urban, *A Yank In Britain*, The Projection Box, 1999, p. 44.
- 7 Michael Ball and David Sunderland, *An Economic History of London: 1800–1914*, Routledge, 2001, p. 20.
- 8 *An Economic History of London*, p. 20.
- 9 Michael Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks*, Routledge, 2nd ed., 1996, p. 18.7.
- 10 Richard Brown and Barry Anthony, *A Victorian Film Enterprise*, Flicks Books, 1999, pp. 6–7.
- 11 *A Victorian Film Enterprise*, p. 6.
- 12 Luke McKernan, *Something More than a Mere Picture Show: Charles Urban and Early Non-Fiction Film in Great Britain and America, 1897–1925* (PhD thesis, Birkbeck College, University of London, 2003), p. 119.
- 13 *A Victorian Film Enterprise*, pp. 43–45.
- 14 *A Victorian Film Enterprise*, p. 67.
- 15 *Came the Dawn*, 30
- 16 Contract dated 23 May 1900, see Nettlefold Collection item, 6, British Film Institute Special Collections.
- 17 McKernan, *Something More than a Mere Picture Show*, p. 44.
- 18 *The Showman*, 3 January 1902, p. 1.
- 19 *The Showman*, 3 January 1902, 1.
- 20 *The Showman* 7 March 1902, 45.
- 21 *Came the Dawn*, 65.
- 22 *The Era*, 24 September 1904, 31.
- 23 Hepworth Manufacturing Co Ltd. National Archives file BT/31/17222/80758.
- 24 A. C. Bromhead, *Proceedings of the British Kinematograph Society*, No 21, 11 December 1933, p. 10.
- 25 *The Showman*, 3 January 1902, p. 1.
- 26 *An Economic History of London*, pp. 68–9.
- 27 Biograph were mainly consolidating their financial position and acting as a producer of films for their Palace showcase for the short time they were in Cecil Court, and did not really expand their day to day business until they moved. See *A Victorian Film Enterprise*, p. 67.
- 28 *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly [KLW]* 19 September 1907, p. 291; Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment*, British Film Institute, 1985, p. 3.
- 29 1906 is chosen because the three companies based there that year had all been there since 1904.
- 30 *The Bioscope*, 23 September 1909, p. 36.
- 31 Caspar Tybjerg, 'Nordisk Films Kompagni', in ed Richard Abel, *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, Routledge, 2005, pp. 482–483; Bebe Bergsten, *The Great Dane and the Great Northern Film Company*, Locare Research Group, 1973, pp. 1–10.
- 32 *KLW*, 20 February 1908, p. 261.
- 33 *KLW*, 12 March 1908, p. 317.
- 34 *KLW*, 26 March 1908, p. 355.
- 35 Around the same time Walter Tyler Ltd set up the Tyler Film Co, to handle the companies rental business. This was based at Film House in Gerrard Street.
- 36 Williamson did not leave Cecil Court, but by 1910 Williamson Dressler Co was not the same business as James Williamson and Co had been in 1907, hence the leaving of the 'original' James Williamson and Co is recorded here.
- 37 W. S. M. Knight, 'The Kine and the Law, No 2: Films on Approval', *KLW*, 28 January 1909, p. 1013.
- 38 *KLW*, 20 May 1909, p. 49.
- 39 See *The Bioscope*, 3 June 1909, pp. 26–27. Anglo-American was dropped from subsequent advertisements.
- 40 *The Bioscope*, 14 April 1910, p. 61. By 1917 the usual pattern for a film release was to screen the film to interested parties six weeks prior to the release date. These parties could be either showmen looking to buy direct from the manufacturer, or rental firms, looking to buy copies to rent. The delay would allow the manufacturer to fulfil the necessary orders, which would be despatched to the client ready for the release date. The rental firms hired staff members to attend screenings on their behalf and to write reports on each film, with recommendations as to whether to buy it or not, and if so, how many copies. At the same time, a number of freelance film viewers also operated. For the most part, they worked

on behalf of showmen who would pay a subscription for their services and would receive each week a list of the films viewed, with notes and recommendations. See the Testimony of W. Arthur Northam to the Cinema Commission of Inquiry, quoted in *The Cinema: Its Present Position and Future Possibilities*, Williams and Norgate, 1917, p. 197.

41 *Bioscope Annual* 1910–11, p. 351.

42 This includes the 25 listed in Table 3, plus Biograph. It excludes Hepworth's original 1897 company, since this was a photographic business and only peripherally related to the film trade.

43 Hepworth, Gaumont, Williamson, Rosie, Precision and The Cinematograph Syndicate.

44 Hepworth, Gaumont, Williamson, Williamson Dressler, New Bioscope, Leo Kamm, Globe, New

Kinemtograph Enterprises, Tyler Apparatus and Cinema Halles.

45 'The Hepworth Studios', *Pictures and Picturegoer*, February 1924, p. 15.

46 *A Victorian Film Enterprise*, p. 6.

47 *A Victorian Film Enterprise*, p. 37, n2.

48 Georges Sadoul, *Histoire générale du cinéma, Vol III; Le cinéma deviant un art Première Volume: L'Avant-guerre*, Denoel, 1951, p. 521; Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1906–1914*, George Allen and Unwin, 2nd imp., 1973, p. 92.

49 Charles Barr, 'Before *Blackmail*: Silent British Cinema', in Robert Murphy, ed., *The British Cinema Book*, British Film Institute, 2nd ed., 2001, p. 14; James Park, *British Cinema: The Light that Failed*, Batsford, 1990, p. 18.