

Pioneers of Early Cinema: 8

Charles Urban (1867-1942)

A businessman, rather than an inventor or film-maker, Charles Urban was an important figure in the early history of cinema in Britain and the United States. He was born in Ohio. At the start of his career, he went into the stationary business in Detroit, establishing a shop with a partner, John Doan. It was a time when the new office technologies of the typewriter and phonograph were beginning to be used and it was probably through Urban's promotion of the phonograph that he became involved in the exploitation of [Edison](#) products. On 11 November 1894, Urban opened a [Phonograph and Kinetoscope Parlour](#) in Detroit and in 1896 obtained the rights to the Edison Vitascope projector in Michigan.

This brought him into contact with the Edison agents, Maguire and Baucus, who asked him to manage their London office in 1897. Under Urban's management, the company prospered and it soon moved into premises in Warwick Court, Holborn, whereupon Urban renamed it The Warwick Trading Company. As well as distributing films, Warwick began making its own, mainly specialising in non-fiction and topical films. Urban was particularly interested in the use of film as an educational tool - he launched the *Unseen World* series of films taken through a microscope in 1903. One of his films, *Cheese Mites*, led to calls for censorship - from the cheese manufacturers!

Along with the other American-founded company, British Mutoscope and Biograph, Warwick dominated the early British film industry. It became renowned for its topical films, notably its coverage of the Boer War in South Africa (1899-1902). It distributed the films made by the [Lumières](#) and Georges Méliès in France, as well as those of British pioneers such as Cecil Hepworth, [James Williamson](#) and [George Albert Smith](#). Warwick also handled the sale of cameras and projectors under their 'Bioscope' trademark and sold one of the first pieces of amateur equipment, the Biokam, which was the rival to the Birtac, invented by [Birt Acres](#).

As a successful entrepreneur, Urban was approached by inventors looking for commercial exploitation. Edward R Turner had invented a complicated method of colour cinematography and, following the withdrawal of financial support from his partner, F Marshall Lee, sought backing from Warwick in 1901. Urban financed Turner's work for six months and a camera and projector for the process was built by Alfred Darling, the Brighton-based engineer who also manufactured the Biokam. When Turner died in 1902, Urban acquired the patent rights to the process and turned to George Albert Smith for help in continuing research on producing a practical process of colour cinematography.

It took Smith four years, during which time Urban resigned as managing director of Warwick and set up the Charles Urban Trading Company in 1903. Urban also became a British citizen in 1906. Smith simplified the process, relying on just two colours, red and green to produce an acceptable range of colours on the screen. His first successful test of Kinemacolor took place in July 1906. The first demonstration of the process took place on 1 May 1908 at Urban's luxurious new headquarters, Urbanora House in London's Wardour Street. Commercial exploitation of Kinemacolor did not begin until the following year, when it was premiered at the Palace Theatre, London on 26 February; thereafter a Kinemacolor film was included in each day's programme for eighteen months.

Urban bought out Smith's interest in the process and formed the Natural Color Kinematograph Company in March 1909. The following year, he gave up the management of the Charles Urban Trading Company to concentrate exclusively on Kinemacolor. In 1911, he took the lease of the Scala Theatre to present a complete Kinemacolor programme. Though mostly films of a topical nature were screened, Urban also began to produce dramas and comedies using his own repertory company of actors, whose performances (and the direction) attracted far less praise than the faithfulness of Kinemacolor's colour reproduction.

Urban's greatest success was a spectacular film of unprecedented length (two-and-a-half hours), shot in India during the Dehli Durbar of 1911. With extensive official collaboration, Urban's cameramen filmed the series of colourful pageants laid on for the visit of King George V at Dehli, Bombay and Calcutta. The film had its premiere at the Scala on 2 February 1912. Urban constructed a stage setting of the Taj Mahal and commissioned music played by an orchestra of forty-eight musicians, a choir of twenty-four, a fife and drum corps of twenty and three Scottish bagpipes. Building on the success of the London run, Urban sent the film around Great Britain and Ireland in what was one of the first series of 'road show' presentations. In fifteen months the film took more than £150,000.

However, though Kinemacolor looked to take the film world by storm, it did not. In 1912, Urban built a cinema in Paris which was unsuccessful; he sold the American rights to the process but it was not managed well and it failed there. Only in Japan did Kinemacolor achieve a measure of success and longevity - seven special cinemas were still operating at the outbreak of the First World War.

By that time in Britain, Kinemacolor was under attack from the photographer and inventor William Friese-Greene and his financial backer, S F Edge. Friese-Greene had patented a two-colour process a year before Smith and they attacked the Kinemacolor patent in the courts. Though they first lost the case, Friese-Greene and Edge won on appeal, which was upheld by the House of Lords in March 1915. Thereafter, Kinemacolor was not protected by patent and anyone could use the process.

During the First World War, Urban was involved with British propaganda films, producing *Britain Prepared* (1915) and editing *The Battle of the Somme* (1916), and moved to the United States to publicise the British war effort. After the war, he established the Kineto Company in the USA amongst whose products was a newsreel. Always interested in home movies, he had acquired the rights to the Spirograph projector in 1907 and was on the point of marketing an improved version in 1923 when his business appears to have collapsed. He returned to Britain but failed to re-establish himself here and retired to Brighton, where he died in 1942.

Further reading

John Barnes *The Beginning of the Cinema in England 1894 – 1901* Five Volumes (University of Exeter press, 1996 – 1998)

Colin N Bennett *On Operating Kinemacolor* (1910)

Rachael Low and Roger Manvell *The History of the British Film: 1896 -1906* (Allen and Unwin, UK, 1973)

G A Smith *Animated Photographs in Natural Colours* (Journal of the Royal Society of Arts, 11 December 1908)

D B Thomas *The First Colour Motion Pictures* (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1969)