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MARTIN HUMPHRIES

From a Crumbling Ruin to the Workhouse

How the Cinema Museum came to be established

Ronald Grant was born in Banchory, a small village set in a very picturesque wooded valley among hills in Aberdeenshire, Scotland in 1936. By the age of ten he was already absorbed by the wonders of cinema, interested in how the beam of light coming from one part of the building transformed itself into images at the other. The local village hall had a permanent projection box in one corner with very ancient silent projectors with bolted on pull-through sound heads pointing over at an angle to the screen. The part-time projectionist who worked at the local saw-mill used to struggle, carrying the film boxes containing the nitrate film (heavier than safety) in single 1.000 foot cans which then had to be joined together in pairs to fill the 2.000 foot spools. It was often a double feature programme unless the main film was very long. Having helped to carry the film boxes to the rewinding room Ronald watched entranced as the films were wound, joined up and repaired. Because of the shortages caused by the war the nitrate prints were often in very bad condition with many different scratched change-over marks and poorly made joins which would separate in the projector causing a noisy audience response.

For this work he was rewarded with discarded strips of film and free entry to the cinema. At home he would project the strips of film with a toy projector onto the whitewashed walls of an outhouse. Very Cinema Paradiso, but instead of becoming a film director he first became an apprentice projectionist when he left school. When he was 21 he set up a small circuit of village cinemas on 35mm and went round in a van with the films and became a collector of anything and everything to do with the experience of going to the cinema. From front-of-house stills, lobby cards and posters to projection equipment and interior decor to cinema plans, company minute books and accounts to usherette uniforms of several decades, ice cream trays and popcorn cups.

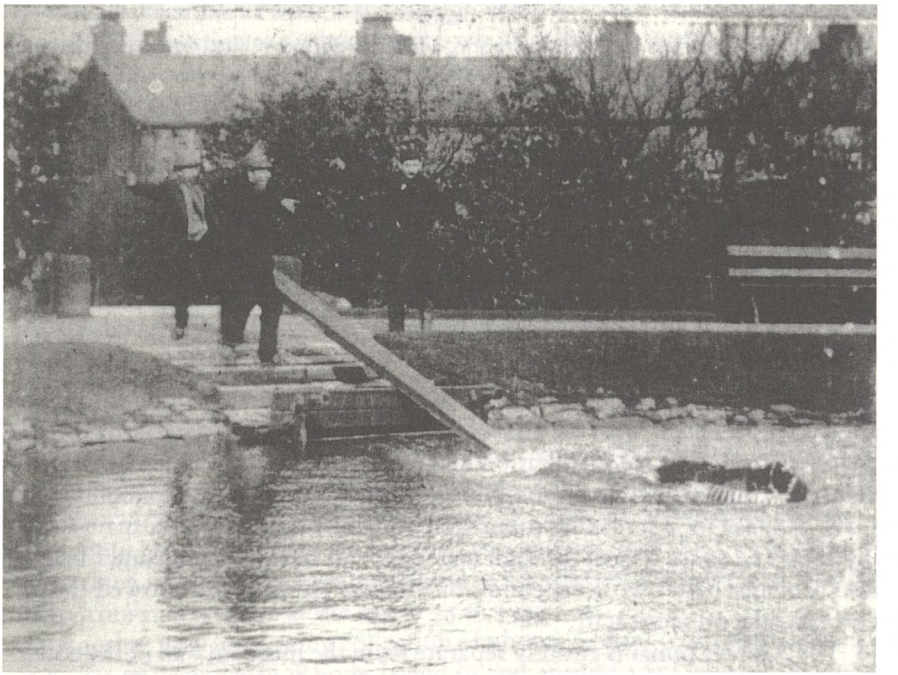
I met Ronald in 1979 and started working with him in 1982 and it was clear to me from the beginning that this was already a significant collection containing a very wide range of material covering the history of cinema. The collection had continued to grow in just these few years with the spectacular addition of a large amount of interior decor, equipment and paperwork from a family owned cinema company that began in the early years of the century and continues to operate in and around Aberdeen, Scotland. In 1983 we start-

DIVING LUCY (GB 1902, Mitchell & Kenyon).

ed to talk and think about how we could safeguard this extraordinary collection of cinema memorabilia.

We felt it was time that the collection should be given a more formal status than that of a private collection, be kept together and that it should continue to have a long life after both of us had died. At that time only the film stills were catalogued. The books were on the shelves along with the magazines. The posters were in or on plans chests. The films were in a cool dry wine cellar. The projection equipment was either on shelves or free-standing, built up complete. The interior design material such as examples of front and internal cinema doors and handles, pay-boxes, light fittings, stills and poster display boards, different cinema company carpets, seat fabrics, staff uniforms and ice-cream trays along with many other items were filling various rooms in our charming but dilapidated building in Brixton. So much needed to be done it was hard to think where to begin.

As we didn't want to be dependent upon grants or donations we knew that it would be important that the Ronald Grant Archive, which fulfils the media demand for material relating to the history and development of cinema, utilised the stills collection as a way of supporting itself, should run in parallel to



Policeman has fallen off the plank after pulling up the wooden legs!

any other structure. After taking advice and exploring various options it appeared to us that if we could create a company limited by guarantee (a not-for-profit company) and apply for charitable status we could ensure that the company's policy and aims were consistent with our hopes for the development and future of the collection.

So this we did in 1985 asking various professional people we knew if they would consider becoming a director of the company. A lawyer drew up the appropriate papers. Once we were a company limited by guarantee we applied for charitable status which we duly received.

Policy

To encourage and promote interest, research, education and enjoyment in cinema from its beginnings to the present day, and related performing arts; including the rise, decline, revival and experience of cinema in London.

This would be achieved through the establishment of a museum for the purposes of research, collection, collation, publication, exhibition and communication of knowledge and information. (Cinema in this context refers both to the architectural meaning of the word and its wider sense of films and film making.)

Aims

Employment in the areas of restoration, administration, archival work, maintenance and technical proficiency.
Educational courses and workshops in communications and media studies in collaboration with other organisations.
Exhibitions both permanent and temporary from the current collection and future acquisitions.
To work with other voluntary and statutory bodies in the exploration of particular aspects of the cinema.
To enhance enjoyment and knowledge of the cinema.
To remain self-supporting.
To operate an equal opportunities policy.

We felt one of our first objectives must be to move the collection into larger and better premises. With the help of Lambeth Council, our landlords then, in 1989 we found the Old Fire Station in Kennington which was a major improvement. This enabled us to store much of the collection in better conditions. Gave us space for a screening room separate, until 1995, from the main working areas and space to sort through material prior to cataloguing and filing. It also provides better working conditions for the Archive and allowed the Archive to take on more staff.

The Archive remains entirely separate from the museum – all of the collection except for the photographs have been given to the Museum. The Archive entirely supports both itself and all the Museum activities – we receive no public funding (nor would we expect to until we settled in better premises which would allow us to significantly increase the activities of the Museum).

Until February 1998 the Museum board was primarily involved in looking for suitable premises. Now that we have them the board will focus on working towards opening up the collection to the public. On February 14 we moved into The Master's House, a part of the Lambeth Workhouse where 100 years ago this July poverty forced Charlie Chaplin, his mother Hannah and half-brother Sydney to stay temporarily, the first of several visits. These new premises will allow us to provide much better facilities to visiting researchers almost immediately and in the long term we can plan to have an exhibition open to visitors and initiate other activities of an educational and archival nature.

Both Ronald and myself do all the active work on the Museum's behalf in terms of film restoration, provision of loan material for exhibitions and any administration. Tony Fletcher is involved in research and the dissemination of information to other researchers and historians. All of this is unpaid. I also run the photographic archive where we have a staff of 7 full-time workers and 3 part-time workers. Naturally much of their work benefits the Museum, particularly that of filing and cataloguing which 3 of the full-time staff are involved in. I hope that by the year 2000 the collection will be able to be seen by anyone who comes knocking at our door.

People often ask us what is the most interesting thing in the collection. This is a difficult question to answer, for the whole collection is of interest to us but some people may only find the posters of interest, others the cinema uniforms, scripts or the projection equipment. We usually answer by highlighting one or two of the more unusual collections.

KINtop readers may be interested in Renee Adoree who achieved international fame in her leading role opposite John Gilbert in MGM's 1925 world war one drama Kap. We have a large box covering her career and personal life containing photographs, clippings from newspapers and magazines, correspondence, the cards from flowers left by the mourners at her funeral signed by the senders: Joan Crawford, Louis B Mayer, Ramon Novarro (who sent a bouquet of yellow roses), Mary and Lottie Pickford, W S Van Dyke, Mr and Mrs John Gilbert and many others, and other ephemera. All this appears to have been part of the effects of her late sister and ended up on a flea market stall. We have kept all the material together because as you look through the box you have a real sense of another person's life from another time. Tony Fletcher's imagination was so taken with this that he determined to make a film about the box. In time he achieved this and has made Kap. a three screen film which is a short but moving tribute to a forgotten actress who died tragically from tuberculosis at the age of 35 in 1933.

Another very interesting collection of photographs is to do with filming in America at Providence, Rhode Island in and around 1912. Again they were acquired in a flea market but reputedly came from the family of Saul Harrison about whom little is known. Certainly he appears in many of the photographs as an actor and later a location scout. Two of the films at least are based on material by the writer and artist James Montgomery Flagg. The photographs are of locations, behind the scenes film-making and production scenes of the Eastern Film Company. Much more work needs to be done in terms of identification of specific films and the people in the photographs.

Early film is an area we are interested in. We acquired a lot of material – film, paper and photographs – from the widow of Graham Head, an enthusiastic scholarly collector in Hove, an adjoining town to Brighton, East Sussex. There are a number of items concerning the Brighton Pioneers, particularly G A Smith, James Williamson and William Friese Greene.

Our most recent large acquisition is 75 films made or distributed by Mitchell and Kenyon from 1900 to 1906. This was a small firm based in Blackburn, Lancashire in the north of England. Established in 1897 for the purpose of producing films it is thought that to have operated until about 1913. We have identified and catalogued most of the films, although we are still uncertain about the exact dates of approximately half of them as they are not listed anywhere we can find. Although Mitchell and Kenyon made many actuality films most of the ones we have are comedies, dramas and fake Boer war films. Remarkably a large number of the films are beautiful negatives in excellent con-

dition. We initially transferred 12 of the fake Boer war films onto safety stock and then in 1997 were awarded The Haghefilm Award by Le Giornate del Cinema Muto and Haghefilm Conservation B.V. The prize money provided nearly half the money to restore the programme screened at the 1997 Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, the wonderful annual silent film festival held in Pordenone, Italy. We showed approximately one hour and fifteen minutes of film at 18 frames per second. The films went down extremely well with the audience and included Kap. [1904], »the biggest English comedy hit of the year« according to the Biograph catalogue, which brought the house down again 93 years after it was made. We would like to show the remaining films at the 1998 Giornate by which time we hope more will be known about these, until recently, obscure pair of early film-makers.

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