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The Following article "**Films in Walthamstow in the early twentieth century**", by John Kirk. is reproduced by courtesy of the editor:

Dear Daniel

We would be very happy for you to make use of this article on Walthamstow Memories – we usually require acknowledgment of author, source and [BALH](#) but you have pre-empted me there by mentioning those already, for which thank you.

Please do go ahead.

Kind regards

Alan Crosby

Editor, *The Local Historian*

Hollywood E17: Film production in Walthamstow in the Silent Era

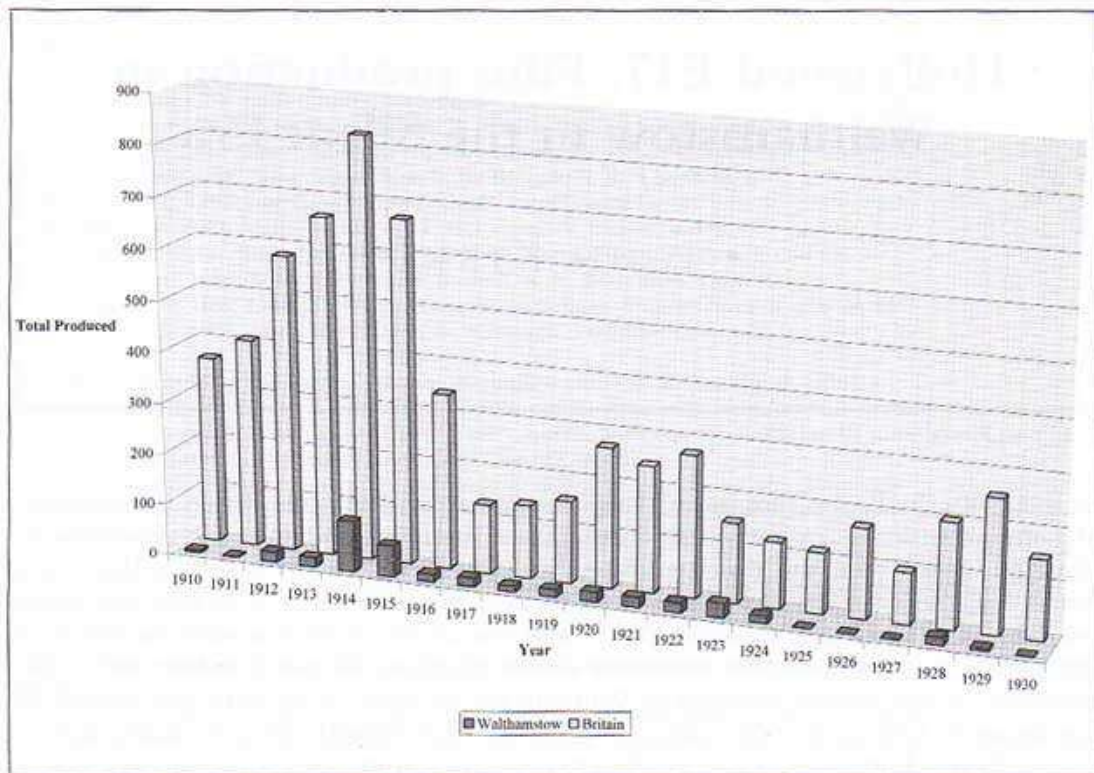
• JOHN KIRK •

By the 1930s the British film industry was centred around the suburbs on the west side of London, with one or two notable exceptions such as the Gainsborough studios in Islington. Since then the districts and suburbs of Ealing, Elstree, Twickenham and others have become synonymous with the British movie industry. This had not always been the case. Until the mid-1920s there were film studios dotted around the whole of the greater London area and the south east of England. In east London, within the boundary of the present borough of Waltham Forest alone there were four studios in use between 1910 and 1924. One of these, the Hoe Street studio in Walthamstow, owned by the British and Colonial Kinematograph Company, was the second largest studio in the country after St. Margaret's in Twickenham. In 1918 Waltham Forest studios totalled almost 20 per cent (16,575 sq. feet) of the total British studio space of 87,000 sq. feet. The Hoe Street studio alone comprised over 10 per cent (9,000 sq. feet) of the British total.¹ Despite these resources, apart from a very brief and insubstantial renaissance at the end of the 1920s, the film industry in Waltham Forest was finished by 1924.

The presence of large-scale film production in Waltham Forest, and in particular in the suburb of Walthamstow, is largely unknown, and this article is concerned with giving the local historian an insight into this once thriving and exciting local industry. Although nothing remains of the Walthamstow film studios, copies of some of the films made there and by the companies that ran them can still be viewed at the British Film Institute and other film archives. Primary source materials relating to the Walthamstow film industry are stored at The Vestry House Museum, Vestry Road, Walthamstow. The museum houses a great deal of source material concerning the history of the area including, on microfilm, the rate books and local newspapers dating back to the nineteenth century. It also has other primary and secondary source materials such as biographies, cuttings from magazines and journals and studies undertaken by local historians. The Vestry Museum does not hold any films but does have a photographic archive containing publicity photos and 'stills' taken on the film sets. The British Film Institute is the best, but not the only, repository of the few remaining films that were produced in the area.

The London suburb of Walthamstow

Walthamstow is a suburb of north-east London and lies about six miles outside the City. It is situated between the River Lea and Epping Forest and until the 1870s was a largely agricultural area. This changed when, in the 1870s, the Great Eastern Railway



1. Bar chart showing the number of films produced in Walthamstow and in Britain as a whole, 1910-1930.

expanded as far north as Chingford. The line ran through Walthamstow and stations were built at St. James Street, Hoe Street (now Walthamstow Central) and Wood Street. Following in the wake of the railway came the overspill from the population of London so that by the turn of the century Walthamstow had become a true suburb. The population rose rapidly from 11,092 in 1871 to a staggering 124,580 by 1911.² This was a more than tenfold rise in only 40 years. Fortunately the area grew at a time when housing and industry were being supplied with amenities such as gas (and later electricity), good sewerage systems and water. A tram service also developed, providing an alternative route to the railway across the River Lea.

Largely because of the presence of the River Lea and the Walthamstow Marshes on one side and Epping Forest on the other, Walthamstow remained a mainly residential area with little industry. Compared with the centre of London which suffered from industrial pollution, including terrible smogs, the area around Walthamstow remained relatively clean and light in the early twentieth century. This clean air, combined with a proximity to central London and the scenery in and around Epping Forest made the area ideally suited to film making. For similar reasons film studios emerged in other suburban areas around London. In the early decades of the industry, film studios had to be near London because they employed many actors and actresses currently working (or out of work) in the West End theatres. The rail and tram links were essential for these players, who could return home after a day's filming and often be back in the theatres where they were due on stage the same evening.³ Although most companies depended on natural light in which to film, a reliable electricity supply was essential to power the few primitive lights and machinery that the studios possessed. This meant that although film studios required clean air, bright light and a large amount of land for studio lots and location work, they could not exist far away from the developed urban centres.

Year	Walthamstow	Britain	% Made in W'stow
1910	4	366	1
1911	1	409	0
1912	20	582	3
1913	18	663	3
1914	99	826	12
1915	61	672	9
1916	14	343	4
1917	17	135	13
1918	11	143	8
1919	14	160	9
1920	19	273	7
1921	19	246	8
1922	19	276	7
1923	28	155	18
1924	14	128	11
1925	0	118	0
1926	0	174	0
1927	0	100	0
1928	15	204	7
1929	5	258	2
1930	0	153	0
Total	378	6384	6%

Statistics are drawn from Dennis Gifford, *The British Film Catalogue 1895-1970*.

3. Table of films produced in Walthamstow and in Britain as a whole, 1910-1930.

Beginnings of the Film Industry in Walthamstow

The film industry in Walthamstow actually predated the arrival of the first studio. Before the construction of purpose-built cinemas, films were exhibited in fair grounds, music halls and shops known as 'Penny Gaffs'. The first motion picture show came to Walthamstow on 10 June 1896 when, at the Victoria Hall in Hoe Street (now the Granada cinema), locally-born George Edward Turner (1872-1961) showed films on a machine called a Vitagraphe for a fee of two guineas.¹ Turner was a great pioneer. In 1897 he began hiring out films, and by 1904 had formed the first film-renting company in Britain when he joined forces with J. D. Walker and G. Dawson to set up the Walturdaw Distribution Company (this was originally known as the Walthamstow Company and registered in Wardour Street W1). Turner was not only an exhibitor and renter; he was also a film maker and shot many 'shorts' in the area. In an interview given shortly before he died Turner described the early film-making process:

In those days we used to make a film in a day or so; if the weather was fine perhaps in one day. We used to pay seven and six (seven shillings and sixpence) for our scenario and for these 200 feet films we used to pay actors perhaps ten shillings a day.⁵

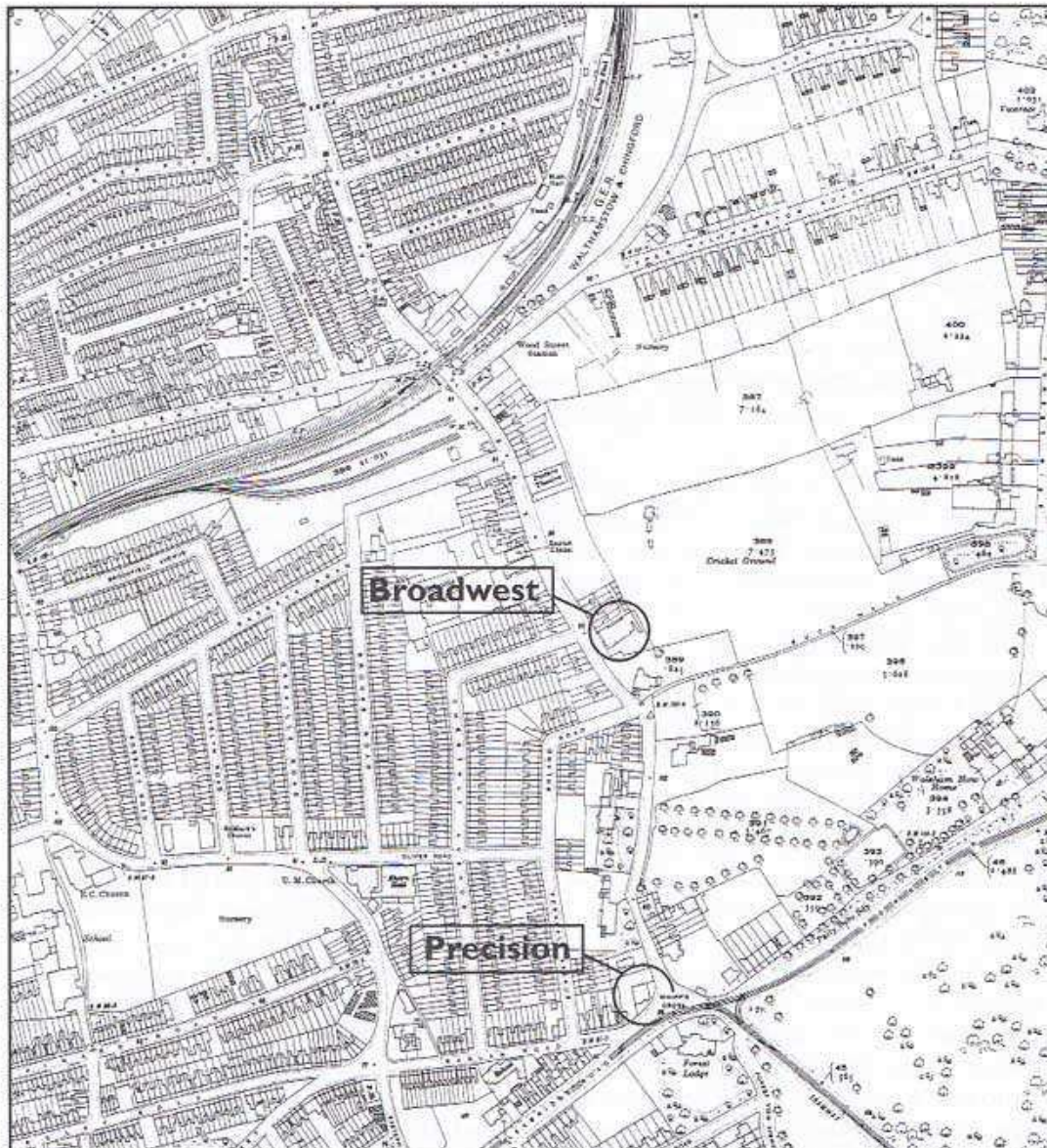
Turner would find his actors at 'Poverty Corner', York Road, near Waterloo Station, which was a popular haunt for out-of-work members of the profession. By 1906 he was showing films at Walthamstow public baths with a synchronised gramophone producing a 'Cinematophone' and what he claimed was the first 'Talkie'. This remarkable invention was stopped, claimed Turner, by the big bosses who controlled the variety and stage circuits. According to Turner many years later, they 'clamped down and threatened to take action'.⁶ Turner's achievements do not stop there. He also invented (with W. Holmes) the fire-proof gate, automatic shutters and spool boxes on film projectors. These were important achievements considering the highly inflammable nature of film and the constant risk of fire. Later in his career Turner became the managing director of the Perforated Front Projection Screen Company, based at 43-49 Higham Street, Walthamstow until the 1950s.⁷ The pinnacle of Turner's success probably came when he managed to sell his film, *Birds Nesting on Higham Hill* (1906), in the United States.⁸

The first Studio in Walthamstow

Early in 1910 the Gobbett brothers, who had formed the local Precision Film Company Limited two years earlier, moved into a purpose-built studio at 280 Wood Street, Whipps Cross, Walthamstow. The two-storey building overlooked Epping Forest and comprised a ground floor of carpenters' shops, paint shops and a storage area, and a first-floor film studio with a glass covered roof.⁹ According to one of the leading historians of British film in this period, it was the first specially-designed studio of this type and was subsequently much copied (notably by the neighbouring Cunard/Broadwest studio further down Wood Street).¹⁰ The building measured 100 feet by 40 feet, but whether all of this 4,000 sq. feet was available as studio floor space is not known. Film processing and development were done at another building in Whipps Cross Road, Leytonstone.¹¹ The company's London office and showrooms were in Cecil Court, near Leicester Square. Most production companies had offices in the West End theatre districts, indicating another connection with, and reliance upon, the theatrical world.

The company survived until 1915, but little is known about its producers or their output. What we do know is that by 1915, when the studio closed, the Gobbett brothers appear to have left and A. E. Radcliffe (of 131 Whipps Cross Road) had become its director with A. C. Treadway as secretary.¹² The one feature film of note produced at the studio was Precision's version of *East Lynne* released in November 1910 and directed by A. E. Radcliffe. On the whole, however, production was restricted to short one-reelers. One of these, entitled *Anarchy in England*, gained much publicity and some notoriety because it was based on the shooting in early 1909 of a policeman in nearby Tottenham. Two Russians stole the payroll of a local rubber factory. During their getaway across the Lea Marshes to Chingford, they shot Police Constable Tyler. Both robbers were then themselves shot and killed. This event was faked by Precision and blatantly advertised as a 'reproduction'. E. G. Turner remembered the incident. He recalled seeing the bodies of the two villains lying in the mortuary. 'They were shot to pieces', he claimed 'and Gobbett made a film of most of the incident.'¹³

In 1912 the studio was leased to Lewin Fitzhamon, the producer of 'Fitz Films', but his tenure seems to have been brief. Fitzhamon had previously worked with one of



3. Extract from the 1914 Ordnance Survey Map of East Walthamstow, showing the Whipp's Cross and Wood Street studios used by Precision and Broadwest film Companies.

London's leading producers, Cecil Hepworth. Hepworth had made the groundbreaking *Rescued by Rover* in 1905, which set many film making conventions. Fitzhamon's involvement in the film established his reputation as an expert in handling children and animals and in the use of trick photography.¹¹

The Whipp's Cross studio must have had something of a chequered and unstable history as its short life-span, the lack of film titles and the change of ownership would seem to indicate. The Precision Company's greatest impact on the industry was the design of its much copied, elevated glass-covered studio and its enticement of other companies into the area.

British and Colonial move in

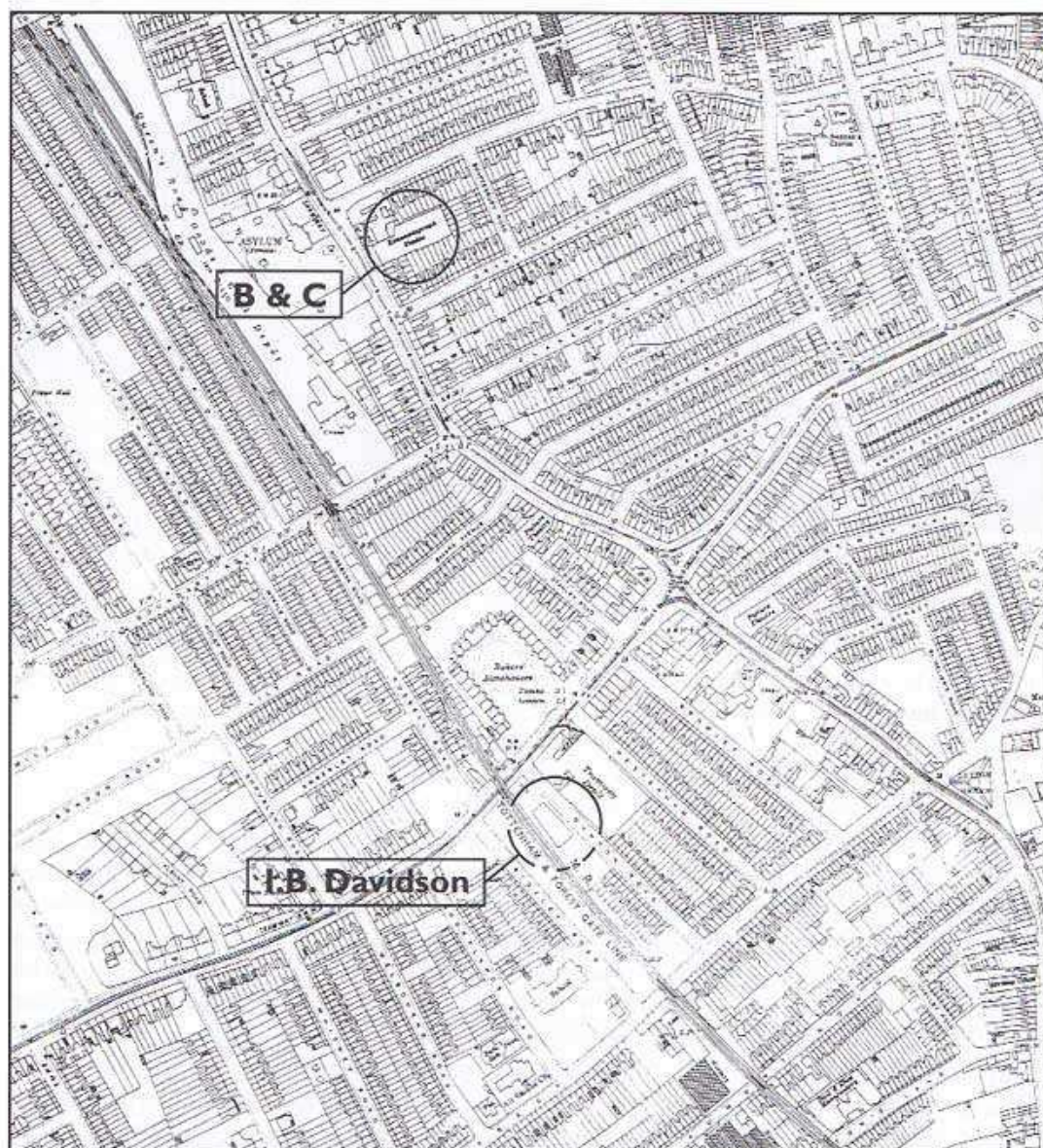
Following the lead of Precision, other film companies began to move into the area. The next was the large and already popular British and Colonial Kinematograph Company. B&C, as it was known, was established in 1909 by A. H. Bloomfield and J. B. McDowell and was originally based at Newstead House studio in East Finchley. During their first three years B&C made their reputation with a number of adventure series featuring characters such as 'Dick Turpin', 'Three Fingered Kate' and the then famous 'Lieutenant Daring'. As they grew more successful, B&C outgrew their tiny studio and as a consequence began to film on location, an unusual and expensive venture at the time. This location work, which saw them filming as far afield as Cornwall, Wales, Europe and even Jamaica, consolidated their reputation for bold and innovative film work. The final stage in securing their reputation came with the filming of *The Battle of Waterloo* in the summer of 1913, rightly classed as the first expensive British spectacle film.¹⁵

By this time the constraints of the East Finchley studio were intolerable and the company moved, in October 1913, into a converted roller skating rink at 317-319 Hoe Street, Walthamstow. The rink was built in 1909 by Good Brothers, who had a large builders' merchants business in Hoe Street, and had remained in business as a rink until 1912. Even before they sold out to B&C, Good Brothers already had connections in the film industry because they owned three cinemas in Hoe Street (the Empire, Queens and Scala). When 317-319 Hoe Street was converted to a studio, Good Brothers supplied B&C with the paints and building materials needed by the set builders.¹⁶ On the Ordnance Survey map of Leytonstone and Leyton (which incorporates South Walthamstow) printed in 1915, the B&C building can be seen clearly labelled as 'Kinematograph Studio' (see Figure 4).

The rink made an ideal film studio, being in effect one large room with 12-foot high walls, a solid maple floor and a partially-glass ceiling. The floor measured 150 feet by 60 feet, giving an overall area of 9,000 sq. feet. This made it the second largest studio in Britain at the time and gave it enough room for up to 20 film sets, although these were often merely painted backdrops. One report suggests that in the area available it was possible to '... erect a street large enough for the passage of a coach and four'.¹⁷ Maximum use was made of natural light, but during the First World War the glass ceiling had to be blacked out because of raids by German Zeppelin airships, and the studio had to be lit by 21 Westminster carbon arc lamps. The main cameras in use were large wooden box types made by a company called Moy. They were a robust device used by many film companies and most famously by Captain Scott on his ill-fated expedition to the Antarctic in 1911-12. In his memoirs Frank Ashen, an employee of B&C, described the layout of the building:

There were two sets of doors at the front, approached by a few wide steps. Dressing rooms for the actors and actresses ran part way along both sides of the studio. Beyond the dressing rooms on the right hand side were a camera room, property rooms, electrician section etc. In a corresponding area on the left hand side were stored the scenery 'flats'. The dressing rooms were somewhat austere, with little signs of comfort or glamour and might at best be described as functional. As well as the studio building the company had taken over the Red House next door. A large area on the ground floor of the house was used as a carpenter's shop and part by the scenic artists. Later some of the other rooms were converted to offices and additional dressing room accommodation.¹⁸

Film processing was done at the company's distribution offices and laboratories at 33 Endell Street, Covent Garden.



4. Extract from the 1915 Ordnance Survey Map of South Walthamstow, showing the Hoe Street and Lea Bridge Road studios used by the British and Colonial Company and I. B. Davidson

By 1914 B&C was one of the top six film companies in Britain. The First World War did not seem to make much difference at first; in 1914 production peaked at 66 films of all lengths (eight per cent of the British total) and even during 1915 a further 20 were released. By the middle of the war, however, production at the Hoe Street studio was suffering, and with shortages of labour, capital and materials beginning to show, production slumped. Only five feature-length films were released in 1916 and 1917. Two of the studio's most prolific producer/directors, Ernest Batley and his wife Ethyle, left the company in early 1915, and this must have had an adverse effect on production levels.¹⁹



5. The British and Colonial Film Studio, Hoe Street, Walthamstow. Filming *The Life of Shakespeare*, 1913.

1916 made the celebrated *Battle of the Somme*. The film companies agreed that any profit made through public distribution of their war footage should be given to military charities.²⁰

Cunard Films

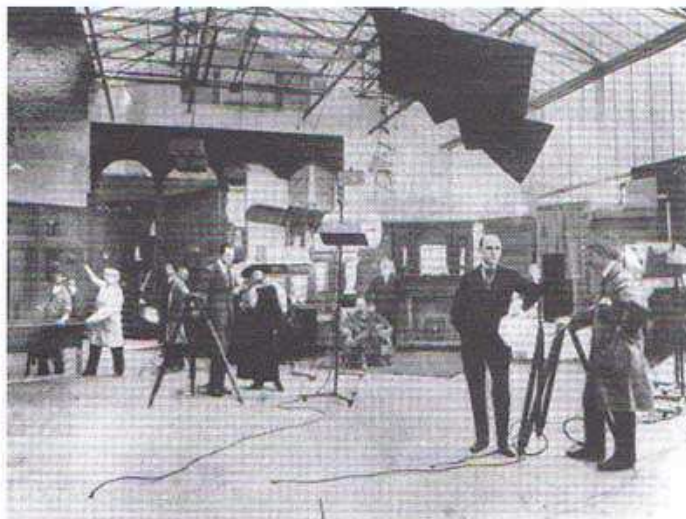
In 1914 B&C were joined in Walthamstow by The Cunard Film Company Limited. This small company was formed by R. F. Gobbett, as managing director, and Walleth Waller as producer, with I. Mortimer as secretary. The aim of the company, set out in what would now be described as a 'Mission Statement', was to build up a firm with a reputation for non-sensational, refined and high-class drama.²¹ Gobbett was one of the brothers who had founded the Precision Company in 1908 and this venture appears to have been his second attempt to establish himself as a film maker.

Cunard moved into a purpose-built studio at 245 Wood Street in October 1914, just down the road from Gobbett's earlier building at Whipps Cross. Much like the Whipps Cross studio, it comprised two storeys with the glass-covered stage area on the upper floor beneath which were situated workshops, stores and processing laboratories. Natural light was supplemented by 30 Westminster arc lights and one LEC, military style, searchlight, although it is not clear whether these were installed by Cunard or its successor company, Broadwest. All processing was done on the premises. The stage measured 115 feet by 45 feet (5,175 sq. feet), which was just over half the area of the B&C studio in Hoe Street. During its first year Cunard managed to make only eight films of feature length (over 2,000 feet) before the death of Walleth Waller in December 1915 caused the company to fold.

Broadwest Films

The studio at 245 Wood Street did not stay empty for long. On 15 January 1916, only a month after the death of Waller, the building was taken over by Broadwest Films Limited who acquired the freehold and contents of the studio. The company had been formed in August 1914 by G. T. Broadbridge as producer and Walter West as director.²²

At the start of the war cameramen who went to film the fighting faced enormous difficulties, having to argue for authorisation to film with the military. To circumvent this, and supported by the Government, which was beginning to realise the propaganda potential of film, the Cinematograph Trade Committee was set up in 1915 with B&C being one of the founders. The managing director, J. B. McDowell, became one of the Official War Cinematographers and in



6. The Broadwest Film Studio, Wood Street, Walthamstow, 1918. Leaning on the camera is the Managing Director Mr. G.T. Broadbridge.

been put in the gas meter. Next day I secured the money (a few hundred pounds) for my first production, and started, with the help of several enthusiastic friends to produce what was to be a winner. I, as producer-scenarist-writer-electrician-set designer, had a leading part in the film whilst the carpenters, office boy and secretary of the small company were also featured in this marvellous movie. The film took ten days to make, was a two reeler and sold at a big profit.

Broadwest specialised in films of novels and successful stage plays. They built up a stock company which included such popular stars as Violet Hopson (who later married Walter West) and Matheson Lang. Broadwest's most famous and successful star (although they did not know it at the time) was Ronald Colman. Colman went on to find fame and fortune in Hollywood, winning the Best Actor Oscar in 1947 for his role as an actor in *A Double Life*.²³



7. Violet Hopson and Walter West rehearsing a scene.

They were based initially at a small studio in Portsmouth Road, Esher. As with B&C, the initial success of the company forced them to look for larger premises and the timely death of Wallett Waller allowed them to move to Walthamstow.

Walter West began making films in 1912. In an interview in *Pictures and Picturegoer* in 1925, West describes his first effort:

The plot for my initial production was conceived in a little back office; by candlelight because my last shilling had long

As all the film processing was done at the studio, the 'rushes' were also viewed there. Because of the fire hazard posed by film at the time, they were set up on a projector which was out in the open and viewed in the property store, the images being projected through an open doorway.²⁴ Like other companies of the time, Broadwest found distribution a problem because of war-time restrictions and the small size of the company,

and in late 1916 opened a joint renting department with the international firm Éclair. Thus films were rented rather than sold, and for this purpose offices were opened at 175 Wardour Street in Soho.

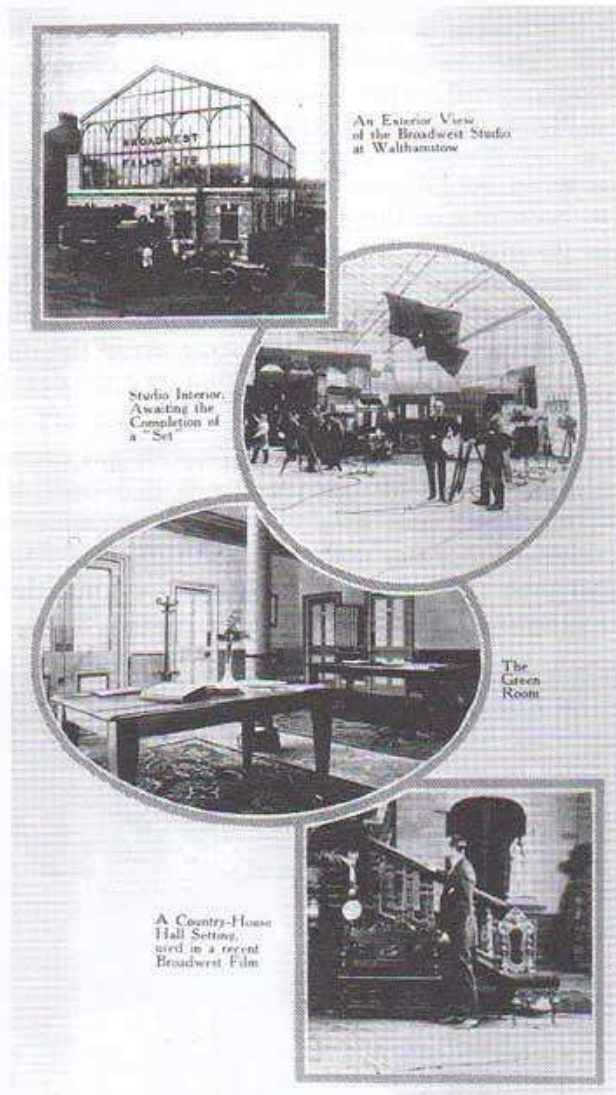
On one occasion in 1915, the company went to Italy to shoot a film on location. *The Woman Who Did* was filmed in Perugia and Milan, and starred Eve Balfour as a girl who lived with the man she loved without marrying him. It was the first time a British film company had gone to Italy, and nobody in the crew spoke the language. Obtaining the relevant passports and visas was difficult in wartime, as was gaining permission from the Italian authorities to film the scenery required.²³

Walter West was called away to war duty as a cinematographer, as J. B. McDowell at B&C had been, and he obtained a commission in the Royal Air Force. Broadwest's wartime output was naturally slowed by the lack of personnel and materials, but it managed to survive and was a major player in the post-war boom.

I. B. Davidson

The last studio to rise to prominence in the area during the early years of the twentieth century was not actually in Walthamstow but on the south side of the Lea Bridge Road boundary which divides Walthamstow and Leyton. Lea Bridge Road was, and remains, the main thoroughfare between Walthamstow and Hackney on the route towards London. At the beginning of the century it was also a main tram route, as can be seen on the Ordnance Survey maps of the time.

Number 588, Lea Bridge Road was a disused horse tram shed owned by the Lea Bridge, Leyton and Walthamstow Tramways Company between 1883 and 1905. Early in 1914 the I. B. Davidson film company converted the shed into a modern 'dark stage' studio. The studio was small in comparison to the B&C and Broadwest studios, measuring a mere 2,400 square feet (60 feet by 40 feet), but this size did not appear to have had an adverse affect on production. Throughout the First World War the company delivered a small but steady stream of films, most



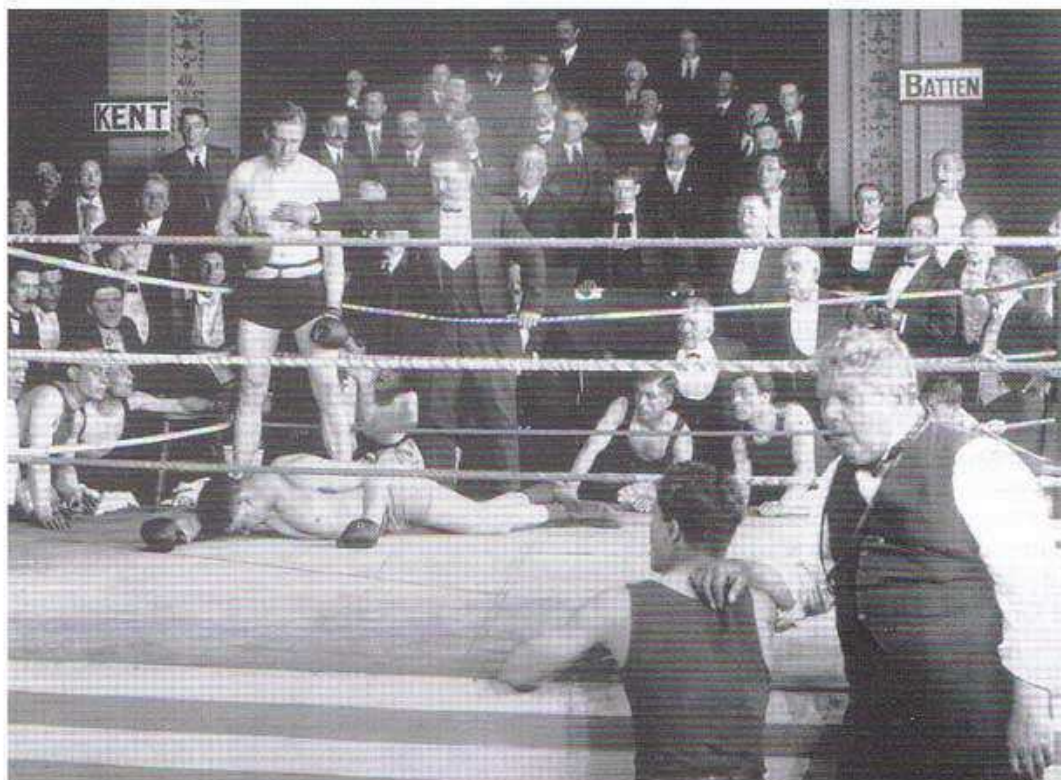
9. Publicity stills from the Broadwest Company information booklet. Printed 1918.

of which were full length features. Production must have been helped by the fact that from the very beginning the studio was equipped with artificial lighting in the form of 35 Westminster arc lamps. Negatives were developed on the premises.

I. Bernard Davidson was a film pioneer specialising in spy stories, sentimental films and boxing yarns, a strange mix indeed! Two of his stars, 'Bombadier' Billy Wells and Victor McLaglen, were boxers in real life. Wells later became famous as the man who banged the gong in the introduction to Rank films. McLaglen went on to stardom in Hollywood, winning the Best Actor Oscar in 1935 for his role in *The Informer* and appearing in many John Ford/John Wayne collaborations such as *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949) and *The Quiet Man* (1952).²⁶ Almost all I. B. Davidson films were produced and directed by A. E. Coleby, Charles Raymond or A. H. Rooke. Production continued during the war years, outstripping the local rivals, Broadwest and B&C, probably helped by the fact that Coleby, the main I. B. Davidson producer, was not called away to war service.²⁷

The Beginning of the End

The film industry benefited from a boom in production and investment immediately after the end of the First World War, but even by 1918, about 80 per cent of films screened in Britain were produced in Hollywood. The lack of British and European film production during the war had allowed Hollywood to swamp the British film market. Because of their huge and highly profitable domestic market, the Hollywood studios could afford to undercut any British film when competing for screen space. To



10. *Kent, the Fighting Man*, 1916. An I. B. Davidson production directed by A. E. Coleby and starring 'Bombadier' Billy Wells. Wells, standing, became the man who banged the gong in the introduction to Rank films.

compound this problem the Americans also introduced the practice of 'Block-Booking', which forced the cinema owners to show less attractive Hollywood products if they wished to screen the real money-spinners.²⁸ The British film industry could not compete, the post-war boom was short lived and in the early 1920s levels of film production in Britain began to fall once again. By 'Black November' 1924, so called because not a single foot of film was exposed in British studios that month, all the original production companies based in the Walthamstow area were bankrupt and their studios had closed. The Precision Company officially ceased production in October 1915.²⁹ Walter West and G. T Broadbridge parted company in September 1921; Broadwest was declared bankrupt, and the Wood Street studio was closed. West moved to Kew Bridge where he continued producing his own films until 1924, when once again he fell into financial difficulty. B&C went into liquidation in July 1924. By 1928 their studio was occupied by the 'Continuous Gramophone' company and was not used for films again.³⁰ The I. B. Davidson company lasted only to the end of 1924. The Lea Bridge Road studio closed when Davidson's production agreement with the distribution company Granger-Binger was terminated.³¹ Some of the larger and more robust film companies in north and west London managed to survive until 1927, when the Government's Cinematograph Films Act set a minimum quota of British-produced films for exhibitors to screen in British cinemas each year.³² As far as the smaller and financially insecure Walthamstow studios were concerned, this was a case of 'too little, too late'.

Throughout 1925 the Walthamstow studios remained dark, but in the summer of 1926 a new production company moved into the area. George Banfield was a small-time producer who had been in the film industry since 1908, but only rose to prominence in the mid-1920s. He ran a company, Cosmopolitan Productions, which made a series of shorts in late 1925 titled 'Haunted Houses and Castles of Great Britain'. One of these films, *Woodcroft Castle* (released in January 1926), was directed by Walter West, who had become a freelance director after the bankruptcy of his company. In August 1926 Banfield acquired the Wood Street studios from West and in September he registered a newly-formed company, British Filmcraft Limited.³³



11. The menu cover from a dinner given in honour of Edward Godal, the Managing Director of the British and Colonial Company in the post-war period. He had been to America in an attempt to employ Hollywood film makers, technicians and actors.

British Filmcraft

British Filmcraft began production riding on the wave of optimism created by the Cinematograph Films Act of 1927. Banfield and his company were ambitious. Early in 1927 plans were made to produce a film titled *Cosmos* showing the history of the world from the beginning of time to the year 2000. It was to be written by the unlikely pairing of the historian, Professor A. M. Low, and the editor of the *Daily Sketch*, Ivor Halstead.³⁴ The film never got off the ground and the company looked in danger of stalling. To prevent this a public share issue of £100,000 was made in November 1927.³⁵ Production plans became more realistic and by April 1928 British Filmcraft had released their first series of shorts, 'Ghosts of Yesterday'. As well as producing films, Banfield often directed and wrote screenplays. A second series, of 'Sexton Blake' shorts, was followed by three full-length feature films, all over 7,000 feet (around 1 hour 30 mins.) in length. In 1929 one more feature was produced along with a final series of shorts on 'Dick Turpin', before the company folded.

Of the four features produced by British Filmcraft, the most notable was the first. *The Burgomaster of Stilemonde* (September 1928), directed by George Banfield, was based on a story by Maurice Maeterlinck. It was set in occupied Belgium in 1914 and concerned German atrocities in the treatment of hostages during the war. At a time when the Versailles Treaty was in dispute and reparation payments by the Germans were not always forthcoming, the subject of the film was very popular. An article in the local paper with the rather inflated title 'Rival to Hollywood' gave details of the nature of the film.³⁶ The film was shot on location in Belgium, Epping Forest and Lloyd Park, Walthamstow, as well as at the Wood Street studio. The old, cobbled Co-operative Society milk yard in Wood Street was used to depict a Belgian town square. Interestingly the local Council objected to the filming of a firing squad scene in Lloyd Park and the scene had to be moved to a part of the borough not under direct Council control. The last line of the newspaper article reads: 'The firm hope to produce other films in Walthamstow which may in time rival Hollywood.' This enthusiasm was not shared by local resident Stan Wrighter, who saw the film on its release, but commented that 'it wasn't too good'.³⁷

British Filmcraft's final output, released in 1929, was a series of four two-reelers on the supposed adventures of Dick Turpin. They starred Kenneth McLaglen, the younger brother of Victor (who had moved on to Hollywood by this time) and were shot partly on location in Epping Forest.³⁸ Unfortunately the formation of British Filmcraft coincided with the advent of the 'talkies'. New and relatively expensive equipment and production techniques meant that, for all the inflated optimism of the *Walthamstow Guardian*, the company could not even match its British rivals, never mind those in Hollywood. The failure of his company, however, did not stop George Banfield, who in 1930 attempted to launch another company, Metropolitan Films. The venture was stopped and the company dissolved after protests by angry shareholders of British Filmcraft.

In 1932 Banfield joined forces with fellow producer G. W. Pearson (who also had a number of failed companies to his name) and formed Audible Filmcraft, a clear attempt to break into the firmly-established market of sound productions. Audible Filmcraft had a nominal capital of £350,000 but was beset, not surprisingly, by legal and financial problems and the company went into voluntary liquidation in August 1932.³⁹

False Dawns

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s speculation and rumours abounded about the re-emergence of the film industry in Walthamstow. Audible Filmcraft was just one of many attempts at this resurrection. In 1926 BGB Productions registered at 245 Wood Street to

produce films.⁴⁰ They had a paltry nominal capital of £300 in £1 shares and were never heard of again. Another company, Civic and Industrial, were registered on 17 August 1931 to 'acquire land at Walthamstow with a film studio erected thereon'.⁴¹ The company had a nominal capital of £1,000 in 500 preference shares of £1 and 10,000 ordinary shares of one shilling. The directors were not named and the company was not heard of again.

The most plausible of these ventures came in 1938. In an article entitled 'Walthamstow Film Studios: Chingford Expert's Venture', the *Walthamstow Guardian* told of a promising enterprise.⁴² James Cannell was a cameraman who had worked for British Filmcraft ten years earlier. Cannell had supposedly invented a system for electrically recording colour on film, obviating the use of dyes. He exhibited his first model camera projector at the British Industries Fair. He planned to film Clive Desmond's *The Brandished Sword* with the intention of using local skilled workers who had been idle for the last ten years. The interiors were to be shot locally (although no particular studio is mentioned) and the exteriors were to be shot in Palestine. Although the venture seems to have been well thought out, the film does not appear to have been made as no records of production can be found.

British Animated Productions

Not all of these ventures were quite so ephemeral. During the Second World War, George Moreno Jr., a GI serving with the American armed forces in France, met a British soldier, Richard A. Smith, and after the war they teamed up to form British Animated Productions.⁴³ Moreno was a talented artist who, before the war, had worked for the Max Fleischer cartoon studio in America and the British productions were to be centred around two of his creations, 'Bubble and Squeak'.⁴⁴ 'Bubble' was a cockney taxi driver and 'Squeak' his highly animated taxi cab. The company was based in Smith's offices at 306 Hoe Street, Walthamstow, in premises rented from the Shernhall Methodist Building Society.⁴⁵ In early 1947, Moreno and Smith released their first production, *The Big City*, an eight minute (638ft.) cartoon featuring 'Bubble and Squeak'. Nearly 50 local people worked on the 15,000 pictures that were needed to make the film before it was cut and edited in Wardour Street.⁴⁶ The film was directed by Harold Mack and some of the comic voices were supplied by actor Jon Pertwee who went on to have a successful television career, most notably as 'Dr Who' in the 1970s. *The Big City* was rather crude, but nevertheless it achieved some promising reviews. *Today's Cinema* noted:

The colour is extremely good, as is the drawing, and the animation and sound effects, if not quite up to the best American standards, are well calculated to please the general run of cartoon lovers.⁴⁷

All the cartoons produced by British Animated Productions were filmed in Technicolor and a total of five were made in 1947 and 1948. *The Big City* was followed by *Fun Fair*, *The Old Manor House*, *Loch Ness Legend* and *Home Sweet Home*. As the productions increased, the technical quality of the cartoons improved, but the company floundered because it could not find studio backing, and production ceased in 1948.⁴⁸ These few cartoons represent the final chapter in the history of film production in Walthamstow, a history which lasted, albeit inconsistently, for 50 years.

The Fate of the Studios

The first of the Walthamstow film studios to close down was, ironically, the last to remain standing in its original form. When the Precision Film Company ceased trading

in 1915 the studio became a tool factory. Eventually the building was incorporated into a larger structure and was still standing in the early 1990s. At this time the glass-covered roof and the large scenery dock doors were intact.⁴⁹ Since then the building has been demolished and the site is now occupied by new housing.

In the 1960s the building which had been occupied by British and Colonial was demolished and a new building housing the Coppermill Telephone Exchange was built. The Telephone Exchange still occupies the site. The Lea Bridge Road studio of the I. B. Davidson company has changed hands on numerous occasions, but has had continuous occupation. The building has been modified and enlarged and how much of the original tram shed remains is unknown. The premises are now occupied by a firm of plumbers' merchants. The Wood Street studio used by Cunard, Broadwest and British Filmcraft remained in use as a film studio for a longer period. However, in March 1933 the studio was converted into a factory by British Canecraft Limited, and remained in use as a factory until it burnt down in August 1959. At the time of the fire the building was occupied by a paper hat and novelty manufacturer, A. E. Bangham & Company Limited.⁵⁰ Since then a new factory, Malro House, has been erected on the site and is still in occupation today.

Unfortunately for the historian not only have the studios vanished but along with them have disappeared the vast majority of the films made there. Of nearly 400 films produced between 1910 and 1930, less than 30 still exist and of these most are incomplete and some consist of only a few seconds or minutes of footage. Nevertheless, what does remain, however brief, is worth preserving because in those few hours of film from the thousands that were originally shot, lies the legacy of a largely forgotten branch of the British film industry. Many of the films include location shots that show the surrounding area of Waltham Forest as it appeared in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The films also remind us that film making in Britain has not always been restricted to a few affluent suburbs west of London. Most of all, however, the films give us a living history which is more than the mere study of an industry but one that encompasses entertainment, propaganda, national history, local history and enterprise.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Glossary

- One-Reeler:* a film of only one reel, lasting about 10 minutes
Short: a film of one reel or less, lasting only a few minutes or seconds
Still: a photograph taken from a single frame of movie film or taken by a still camera usually for use as promotional material
Rushes: unedited film used by the director to see how the shooting of a film has progressed
Talkie: a film accompanied by a soundtrack. The soundtrack was recorded on to a disc synchronised to the film.
Flats: large sheets of plywood or board, propped upright, fastened together and decorated to form the backdrop of a film set

REFERENCES

- 1 Rachel Low, *The History of the British Film 1918-1929* (London, 1971), p.218.
- 2 Tables of Population in the *Victoria County History of Essex*, Volume VI (Oxford, 1973), p.241.
- 3 M. O'Brien and J. Holland, *The Film Industry in Walthamstow 1900-1929*, Waltham Forest Video History Workshop (unpubl. typescript, 1985), Vestry House Museum in Walthamstow. Margaret O'Brien was a tutor at the local college. This typescript became the basis of a later article entitled 'Picture Shows' which was published in the February 1987 edition of *History Today*.
- 4 Gregory Tonkin, *Showtime in Walthamstow*, Walthamstow Antiquarian Society (London, 1983), p.6. This was first published in 1967 when Tonkin worked at the Vestry House Museum in Walthamstow.
- 5 *Walthamstow Guardian*, 5 May 1961.
- 6 *Walthamstow Guardian*, 3 June 1955.
- 7 A catalogue for George Turner's 'Perforated Front Projection Screen Company Limited' dating from the 1950s is kept at the Vestry House Museum. It is marked 'E.G. Turner est. 1896'.
- 8 *Walthamstow Guardian*, 27 March 1959.
- 9 *The Bioscope*, 5 May 1910, p.45. The *Bioscope* was an early film journal, the entire catalogue of which can be viewed on microfilm at the British Film Institute library in London.
- 10 Rachel Low, *The History of the British Film 1906-1914* (London, 1949), p.109.
- 11 *The Bioscope*, 5 May 1910, p.45.
- 12 Tonkin, *Showtime in Walthamstow*, p.24.
- 13 *Walthamstow Guardian*, 3 June 1955. The film was released in January 1909.
- 14 Detail of 'Fitz's' early work and a filmography of some 379 films can be obtained from Denis Gifford's *Illustrated Who's Who in British Film* (London, 1978), p.104.
- 15 *The Bioscope*, 3 July 1913, p.51.
- 16 Frank L. Ashen, *Some Recollections of the British and Colonial Film Studios in Walthamstow* (unpubl. typescript, 1987), p.2; Vestry House Museum.
- 17 *The Bioscope*, 8 July 1915, p.198.
- 18 Ashen, *Some Recollections*, pp.2-3.
- 19 Ethyle Batley, who died in 1917, was one of the few women film-makers of the period. She is credited with directing nearly 20 B&C films in 1913-1914. Ernest Batley also acted and played the part of Napoleon in B&C's 1913 epic *The Battle of Waterloo*. A few minutes of this film have survived and can be viewed at the Huntly Film Archive, 78 Mildmay Park, London N1.
- 20 O'Brien and Holland, 'Picture Shows', 15.
- 21 Rachel Low, *History of the British Film 1914-1918* (London, 1950), p.84.
- 22 Tonkin, *Showtime in Walthamstow*, p.26.
- 23 *Virgin Film Guide* (5th edn., London, 1996), p.181.
- 24 O'Brien and Holland, 'Picture Shows', 14.
- 25 *Broadwest Films Limited 1914-1918*, printed publicity booklet (1918), Vestry House Museum.
- 26 *Virgin Film Guide*, p.321.
- 27 Low, *History of the British Film 1918-1929*, pp.136-37.
- 28 A number of films would be sold to the exhibitors as a package, effectively forcing them to screen the product of only one company. The term 'Blockbuster', now used in reference to a film of epic proportions, was coined to denote a film that was so good that it was worth showing, no matter what the cost to the exhibitor.
- 29 Tonkin, *Showtime in Walthamstow*, p.24.
- 30 Walthamstow Rate Books, April 1928-March 1929.
- 31 Low, *History of the British Film 1918-1929*, p.137.
- 32 The Act did not (and indeed could not) take quality or length of film into account, and this allowed American film companies to make short, cheap films in British studios to fulfil their legal obligations. The often derided products were known as 'Quota Quickies'.
- 33 Low, *History of the British Film 1918-1929*, p.196.
- 34 *The Bioscope*, 19 May 1927, p.20.
- 35 Low, *History of the British Film 1918-1929*, p.197.
- 36 *Walthamstow Guardian*, 29 June 1928.
- 37 Interviewed in *Hollywood E17*, a 16mm. film made by the Walthamstow Cine Club in 1990. This 30-minute film, directed by Roy Garner, gives a history of the studios and includes excerpts from some of the films made in them.
- 38 Tonkin, *Showtime in Walthamstow*, p.27. One of these films, *Nemesis* (dir. Leslie Eveleigh, 1929), can be viewed at the BFI.
- 39 Rachel Low, *Film Making in 1930s Britain* (London, 1985), p.174. Low states that Audible Filmcraft managed to make 'one feeble sound feature', but I can find no record of this.
- 40 *Walthamstow Guardian*, 8 October 1926, p.2.
- 41 *Walthamstow Guardian*, 21 August 1931, p.4.
- 42 *Walthamstow Guardian*, 8 July 1938, p.2.
- 43 Maurice Horn (ed.), *The World Encyclopaedia of Cartoons*, Volume 1 (London, 1980), p.145.
- 44 Denis Gifford, *British Animated Films 1895-1985* (London, 1987), p.136.
- 45 This is not the same premises which housed the B&C film company in the silent era. Walthamstow Rate Books, April 1947-March 1948.
- 46 *Walthamstow Guardian*, 3 January 1947.
- 47 *Today's Cinema*, 30 April 1947.
- 48 Horn, *World Encyclopaedia of Cartoons*, Volume 1, p.145.
- 49 Documentary footage of the derelict studio premises, clearly showing the glass roof and large dock doors, can be seen in *Hollywood E17* (Walthamstow Cine Club).
- 50 Walthamstow Rate Books 1933, 1959.

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