

# **Cinema, Entrepreneurship and Society in the South Wales Valleys, 1900 to the 1970s**

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (History and Welsh History)

Cardiff University

2016

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## Summary

This thesis explores the role played by small-scale cinema entrepreneurs in the south Wales valleys in establishing cinema as the predominant cultural medium of the twentieth century. The focus and methodology draw heavily on the ‘new cinema history’ that emerged in the early 2000s and champions a reorientation of cinema history away from a concentration on films as cultural products towards a more sociological approach that views cinema as a social institution located within specific community settings. The continuing dominance of small-scale cinema ownership in the south Wales valleys (in most areas of the UK, the major cinema chains, such as Odeon and ABC, came to control the market) meant that cinema proprietors were often prominent local figures. Not only did they exercise a considerable amount of influence on the audience experience, they were also active players in their local communities, cultivating relationships with civic leaders, contributing to a range of local good causes and promoting the community benefits of cinema. Given the controversial nature of cinema, they became adept ‘cultural brokers,’ negotiating with regulatory authorities, appeasing oppositional groups whilst keeping a weather eye on fluctuating popular tastes. The divisive nature of cinema makes it an ideal lens through which to examine the dynamics of civil, social and commercial life of south Wales towns as they transitioned from conditions of economic boom to post industrial bust. The focus of this study is Bargoed in the Rhymney Valley, which was home to the Withers, one of the most important, and yet little known, cinema-owning families in south Wales. By holding the magnifying glass up to a single town and business the aim is to move beyond generalizations and examine closely how various social, economic and cultural forces interplayed at the local level.

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## **Dedication**

To C. G. Evans who introduced the family to Bargoed and bestowed me with the stubborn streak that has helped see this thesis through to completion.



## **Acknowledgements**

PROFESSOR BILL JONES – for his invaluable advice, always given with a light touch.

ELIN JONES - with whom I have shared innumerable notes on our parallel journeys.

THE STAFF OF BARGOED LIBRARY– for their generous help and for providing such a convivial working environment

## Introduction

*The heroes of these micro-histories – the Menocchios of the cinema – will be the small businessmen who acted as cultural brokers, navigators and translators of the middle ground constructing a creolized culture out of their community's encounters with the mediated external world.*

Going to the movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema<sup>1</sup>

So domineering is the image of the cinema industry as a global phenomenon, driven by corporate giants such as Gaumont, ABC and Odeon, that the role played by the small-scale cinema entrepreneur has been all but air brushed from cinema history. And yet early cinema depended on the entrepreneurial spirit and unflagging energy of thousands of independent cinema owners, and in some parts of the country independent ownership prevailed until well into the twentieth century.

This thesis explores the role played by small-scale cinema entrepreneurs in the south Wales valleys in establishing cinema as the predominant cultural medium of the twentieth century. The focus and methodology draw heavily on the 'new cinema history' (described in more detail in Chapter One) that emerged in the early 2000s and champions a reorientation of cinema history away from a concentration on films as cultural products towards a more sociological approach that views cinema as a social institution located within specific community settings.<sup>2</sup> Before the advent of this new school of cinema history, the roles played by cinemas and cinema entrepreneurs within their local communities had been largely overlooked. Whilst the commercialisation of entertainment has been a feature of the leisure landscape since as early as the eighteenth century, the arrival of cinema in the early years of the twentieth century brought a considerable step change. Film had the unique ability to be replicated and reused enabling entertainment entrepreneurs to reach far greater

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<sup>1</sup> Edited by Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes and Robert C. Allen (Exeter, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> One of the first compilations to be published under the banner of 'new cinema history' was Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes and Robert C. Allen (eds.), *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema* (Exeter, 2007). This was followed by Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst and Phillippe Meers (eds.), *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and case studies* (Maldon, 2011) and Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby and Philippe Meers (eds.), *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: New perspectives on European cinema history* (Abingdon, 2012).

numbers of people and maximize profits. The globalisation of the industry that ensued in large part explains why small-scale cinema entrepreneurship has escaped scholarly attention.

In this thesis I propose that in spite of the commoditization of the industry and its international reach, cinema was far from being a faceless, remotely operated institution. Relatively quickly it was woven into the socio-economic and cultural fabric of communities and the reception it received from civic leaders and the wider public can provide a useful barometer of broader community dynamics.

The location for the study is the south Wales valleys where the role of the small-scale cinema entrepreneur was particularly important since this form of provision endured whilst in most other areas of the United Kingdom the major cinema chains came to dominate the industry. In his book on the social history of cinema between 1918 and 1951, Peter Miskell speculates that the large cinema companies did not move into the south Wales valleys in the 1930s, the heyday of the construction of super-cinemas or ‘dream-palaces’, because the geography of the area limited catchment areas and potential profitability.<sup>3</sup> Although the valleys were largely urbanised, the majority of communities were relatively small and isolated with restricted mobility between locations. A Parliamentary enquiry, commissioned following a period of sporadic industrial unrest and reporting in 1917-1918, was struck by the physical constraints of the area describing the valleys as ‘scooped out by impetuous streams’, for the most part ‘extremely narrow with inconveniently steep sides’ and the crowded mining communities ‘shut in on either side by high mountains’.<sup>4</sup> The constraints placed on transport by geology and geography encouraged self-containment. Each valley, however small, had its own cinema.

The early days of cinema also coincided with a period of economic boom in the south Wales valleys and local entrepreneurs were quick to see the potential in the medium and enthusiastically developed new cinemas. The explosion in demand for coal in the late 1800s and early 1900s transformed the economies and communities of

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits: A social history of the cinema in Wales 1918-1951* (Cardiff, 2006), p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Commission of Enquiry into Industrial Unrest No. 7 Division, Report of the commissioners for Wales, including Monmouthshire, 1917-1918, H.M.S.O. (Cmd. 8668), p. 12.

the south Wales valleys, doubling their population and spawning many entrepreneurial opportunities, including new leisure-based businesses. This generous early provision of cinemas was sufficient to meet the demands of the inter-war years when a savage depression gripped the valleys and the local population went into decline.<sup>5</sup>

The enduring preponderance of small-scale cinema ownership in the south Wales valleys generates a rich research agenda. The arrival of commercial cinema is usually portrayed as an impersonal, homogenous and homogenizing force, existing in conceptual opposition to earlier, more organic and class-specific leisure forms. The prevailing assumption is that cinema owners, in particular small-scale operators with limited purchasing power, were simply conduits for largely US produced film fodder and had little agency in shaping the cinema-going experience. The evidence presented here challenges this proposition at least in relation to the south Wales valleys. I argue that small-scale cinema entrepreneurs were not drone-like seekers of profit. A close examination of their *modus operandi* reveals that not only did they exercise a considerable amount of influence on film programmes and the broader audience experience, they were also active players in their local communities, cultivating relationships with civic leaders, contributing to a range of local good causes and promoting the community benefits of cinema. They were adept ‘cultural brokers’, negotiating with regulatory authorities, appeasing oppositional groups whilst keeping a weather eye on fluctuating popular tastes.

The exploration of the role played by cinema entrepreneurs provides important insight into the civic, social and commercial life of south Wales towns as they transitioned from conditions of economic boom to post industrial bust. More specifically, the study examines the part played by cinema owners in the ‘civic project’, which Andy Croll broadly defines as the collective attempt to ‘order, civilize and rationalize the urban experience’.<sup>6</sup> In many south Wales towns the civic cause was an intense and urgent one since civic infrastructure and codes of behaviour were

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: Wales, 1880-1980* (Oxford, 1981); John Davies, *A History of Wales* (London, 1993); Chris Williams, *Capitalism, Community and Conflict: The South Wales Coalfield, 1898-1947* (Cardiff, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Andy Croll, *Civilising the Urban: Popular culture and public space in Merthyr, c1870-1914* (Cardiff, 2000), p. 3.

lagging some considerable way behind population growth. In his study of the ‘civilisation’ of Merthyr Tydfil, Croll argues that the public spaces of a town (and the various popular cultural practices that made demands on those spaces) were ‘heavily implicated in the mission to civilize the urban’. Some were deemed inimical to the cause and had to be discouraged, whilst others could more easily be assimilated into the ideal civic image. He argues that the ‘ensuing debates and numerous initiatives to protect the civility of the streets fed into the very identity of Merthyr itself’.<sup>7</sup>

The controversial nature of many popular cultural habits, including cinema, make them an ideal lens through which to examine the dynamics of relationships that clustered around the civic project. Unlike the worlds of work and religion where hierarchy, strict behavioral codes and supervisory controls prevailed, leisure was a relatively unregulated arena. It was for this reason that since the mid 1800s social reformers had sought to tame its more unruly manifestations and provide more morally edifying alternatives.<sup>8</sup> Whilst south Wales towns had enjoyed a relatively rich social life provided principally by church, chapel, public hall and working men’s institute, the arrival of commercial alternatives created a more complex leisure landscape in which leisure habits were increasingly used for social and moral differentiation. Whilst class was, undoubtedly, of over-riding importance in determining life experiences and outcomes, as the twentieth century progressed it became ever more difficult to neatly assign leisure habits to class specific categories. This was due partly to the overlap of leisure pursuits that existed between classes, especially in the close confines of the south Wales valleys where a single theatre or cinema often strove to meet the entertainment needs of a whole community. Additionally, expanded consumer choice and the greater behavioral freedom associated with commercial leisure supported the creation (or at least facilitated the expression) of more multi-dimensional and nuanced identities. Understandably, increased exposure to alternative attitudinal and behavioral models was perceived as a major threat to the settled order of work and religion. Church and chapel leaders, in particular, were concerned that the transformative effects of commercial leisure, and

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<sup>7</sup> Croll, *Civilising the Urban*, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Helen Mellor, *Leisure and the Changing City, 1870-1914* (London, 1976) and Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational recreation and the contest for control 1850-1885* (London and New York, 1978).

cinema in particular, would undermine religion's moral and cultural supremacy within communities.<sup>9</sup>

In other community leadership circles, the arrival of a new cinema or theatre was celebrated as a symbol of a town's progression from provincial backwater to modern 'metropolis'. Perceived benefits were two-fold. The window on other worlds provided by cinema/theatre held the promise of broadening cultural horizons, whilst an expanding market for leisure would strengthen the commercial-base of fledgling towns. Increasingly, commercial interests were aligned with the broader civic aspirations of south Wales towns.

The polarization of perspectives on cinema reflects the transformative potency ascribed to the medium, whilst the controversy that surrounded the issue reveals local fissures and factions that might otherwise remain submerged from retrospective analytical view. By studying responses to the arrival of cinema and the role that cinema entrepreneurs played within local communities, the aim is to better understand the complexity of community relationships within south Wales valleys towns. The objective is to move beyond an analysis of capital/labour relations that has traditionally dominated Welsh historiography, and throw a spot light on the growing multiplicity of perspectives and interests that characterized the valleys as they forged forward with their civic plans. Whilst a focus on work relations is understandable given the early dominance of the coal and iron industries and the critical role the south Wales valleys played in the development of unionism and radical politics,<sup>10</sup> it is also important to capture and understand the other worlds inhabited by increasingly diverse valleys communities. Through the lens of cinema this thesis examines the role played by previously neglected players on the historiographical stage in shaping local communities, in particular a growing and increasingly influential middle class. Whilst occupational classifications differentiate neatly between commercial, professional and other middle-class groups, it seems that the rapid socio-economic transformation of the valleys in the early twentieth century, and the opportunities it spawned, led to a considerable overlap and blurring of interests. For example, many

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<sup>9</sup> In a chapter on Censorship and Control in his book *Pulpits, Coal pits and Fleapits*, Peter Miskell describes how the church and chapel in Wales used the regulatory framework for cinema exhibition to introduce controls on the industry.

<sup>10</sup> Chapter One includes a review of relevant Welsh historiography.

professionals were involved in commercial enterprises and trades-people frequently dabbled in multiple trades and services. Whilst the readiness to invest was part of a wider ‘investment culture’ of the late Victorian and early Edwardian period,<sup>11</sup> the amount of entrepreneurial energy in the valleys very much reflects the effervescence of the regional economy of the time. Many working class people were also swept up by this investment culture, buying shares in local companies including the small-scale cinema companies that were springing up in south Wales valleys towns in the early years of the twentieth century.

This thesis explores how commercial interests jostled and aligned themselves with other collective imperatives such as the civic project, the emergence of Labour politics and the development of welfare programmes to alleviate local hardship. By examining responses to cinema, the thesis aims to unravel the relative importance of class compared to other considerations such as religion, community leadership and commercial concerns, and how these interests were mediated through an increasingly sophisticated local administrative system responsible for implementing a new regulatory framework for cinema.<sup>12</sup>

Relatively little has been written on cinema in Wales, especially its social history. Peter Miskell’s book *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits: a social history of the cinema in Wales 1918-1951* is an important exception. He explores how cinema entertainment was provided and consumed in Wales, and includes a chapter on cinema companies in which he describes patterns of ownership, employment and management, and also the links that cinema owners and managers had with their local communities. His contribution is undoubtedly a significant one. He brings an interesting consumerist perspective, recognizing the desire of even the most economically deprived communities to ‘embrace modernity and to keep up with the latest trends and fashions’.<sup>13</sup> He also acknowledges the impact that cinema ownership had on the cinema-going experience and community relationships. However, because patterns of cinema ownership varied across Wales and the focus of his book is Wales-

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Nancy Henry and Cannon Schmitt, *Victorian Investments: New perspectives on finance and culture* (Bloomington, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> The Cinematograph Act 1909 was the first piece of legislation to specifically regulate film exhibition.

<sup>13</sup> Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*, p.16.

wide, he is unable to explore the dynamics of local relationships in any detail. Also, his study spans the years 1918 to 1951 and, consequently, overlooks two of the most important development phases of the cinema industry - the early years of the twentieth century when most cinemas in the south Wales valleys were developed, responses to cinema were beginning to form and cinema owners were most active within local communities, and the 1960s/1970s when cinema's popularity was on the wane and its role within communities had significantly weakened.

Whilst my study is inherently local in nature (the scope and methods are described later in this introduction), it engages with a number of themes that have a wider historiographical resonance. One such theme is the creation of a mass market for leisure that emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century which, because of the need to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, led to many working class leisure pursuits becoming more 'respectable'. Whilst the commercialization of leisure has received some scholarly attention,<sup>14</sup> by focusing on the interactions of leisure providers at the local level, this study highlights how very competitive the leisure market was in south Wales valleys towns and how much overlap there was between private, public and voluntary sector providers. For instance, many public providers, such as working men's institutions, ran tightly controlled commercial operations, whilst many private operators were renowned for their charitable largess.

Another important theme that has wider historiographical reverberations relates to the change versus continuity debate. The study explores the extent to which cinema represented a major departure in terms of leisure provision, or whether its fairly rapid assimilation into the mainstream was due to the strong links it had with earlier entertainment forms such as the music hall. It also examines how levels and methods of community engagement shifted over the years in response to broader socio-economic, cultural and technological trends.

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge, 1998); Asa Briggs, *Mass Entertainment: The Origins of a Modern Industry*, The 29<sup>th</sup> Joseph Fisher Lecture in Commerce (Adelaide, 1960); J. H. Plumb, *The Commercialization of Leisure in Eighteenth-century England*, The Stanton Lecture (University of Reading, 1972).



A further underlying theme is the increasingly significant part cinema played in people's lives at individual and collective levels as the twentieth century advanced. Although the thesis does not specifically examine audience experiences, one of its central tenets is the importance of cinema to how people and places defined themselves (and others) that meant it was simultaneously an arena for community conflict and consensus. A related theme that runs through much leisure historiography (and social history more generally) is the extent to which leisure consumers actively shaped their leisure experiences or were the more or less passive recipients of profit-driven mass entertainment or the reforming agendas of the disciplining authorities of chapel/church and state. This study, like many other leisure histories, finds that consumers exercised a high degree of agency not only in terms of the cinema-going experience but also in relation to how cinema was received and operated as a local institution. On some perennial issues, such as Sunday opening (which I use as a case study throughout), the attempts to exercise agency by different factions created major community divisions. It is also important to bear in mind that whilst cinema was very much a local institution, it was not immune from the wider structural forces (such as technological change, economic conditions, shifting cultural habits) that molded and buffeted the south Wales valleys over the period covered by this study. Indeed, it was ultimately these broader forces that changed the face of the cinema industry, including the role played by cinema entrepreneurs within their local communities. These themes are discussed in more detail in Chapter One, which reviews relevant historiographies. The remainder of this introduction describes the scope of the study, the sources and methods employed and, finally, how the thesis is structured.

### **A local perspective**

An exploration of the community impacts of cinema requires a local perspective. The focus of this study is Bargoed in the Rhymney Valley, which was home to the Withers, one of the most important, and yet little known, cinema-owning families in south Wales. By holding the magnifying glass up to a single town it is possible to examine how various social, economic and cultural forces interplay at the local level. The aim is to move beyond generalisations and locate cinema in the richness of everyday life – for example, the portable theatre struggling to survive in

the face of competition from permanent venues; how Nonconformist discomfort with the frivolity of cinema was ameliorated by an even greater distaste for the popular working class pursuits of drinking and gambling; the strategies employed by a growing middle class to ‘civilise’ a fledgling valleys town; and the tactics deployed by cinema owners to remain afloat in the harsh economic climate of the 1920s and 1930s. This finely grained texture is important when examining how change affects different sections of the population and how vested interests are negotiated on a daily basis. Bailey argues for the extension and enrichment of leisure history by local and regional case studies,<sup>15</sup> and similarly the ‘new cinema history’ has made a convincing case for micro-historical enquiries that ‘tell specific stories about local people, institutions and communities’.<sup>16</sup> This specificity is helpful in challenging the accepted conceptualizations of Welsh society. Davies’ insightful and colourful study of Carmarthenshire society at the turn of the twentieth century focuses on experiences at the level of the individual and in so doing changes the ‘configuration of the kaleidoscope’, overturning commonly held generalisations about rural society – for example, the assumption of a ‘green, pleasant, idyllic land in which a healthy robust peasantry – “gwerin” – live contented lives and of a ‘Bible-black morality’.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Andy Croll’s study of Merthyr Tydfil provides a nuanced picture of the civic project, one that implicates all urbanities, to varying degrees and at varying times, constituted as both subjects and objects of the civilizing power’.<sup>18</sup> Society has a complex and contradictory nature and is only at the micro-historical level that these intricacies and subtleties can be unraveled.

The choice of town (in Bargoed) and business (in the Withers) is due in great part to personal interest. My curiosity about the Withers family was initially sparked more than twenty years ago when my family acquired a number of Alfred Withers’ business papers and family photographs. Two journals of film reviews undertaken assiduously by the whole family (up to one hundred films reviewed in any one month) shook my pre-conception of cinema owners as relatively insignificant links in the film

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Bailey, ‘The politics and poetics of modern British leisure: A late twentieth-century review’, *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 3:2 (1999), p.154.

<sup>16</sup> Maltby, Biltereyst and Meers (eds.), *Explorations in New Cinema History*, p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> Russell Davies, *Secret sins: sex, violence and society in Carmarthenshire, 1870-1920* (Cardiff, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Croll, *Civilising the Urban*, p.7.

production-consumption chain. Further research revealed how little had been written on film exhibition. Cinema entrepreneurs, especially small-scale operators, had been erased from cinematographic history. The focus on Bargoed and the Rhymney valley, which have to date received little academic attention, also provides an opportunity to expand our knowledge of daily life in the south Wales valleys and to test whether the findings for other south Wales towns (Merthyr Tyfil has perhaps received most scrutiny<sup>19</sup>) have wider applicability.

Whilst local studies do have many advantages, they do raise the spectre of representativeness. As Davies expresses it, ‘the microcosm is not necessarily representative of the macrocosm’.<sup>20</sup> I have attempted to compensate for this inevitable weakness by carrying out some of the research at the regional level. For example, the analysis of licensing records was conducted at local authority and county levels whilst cinema company records were analysed for the whole south Wales valleys area. Whilst regional data tends to be quantitative in nature and local data qualitative, this type of multi-level research allows for an, albeit rudimentary, assessment of the extent to which Bargoed and the Withers family were unusual amongst their peers or were part of a broader configuration. We know, for example, that whilst Bargoed was lagging behind more established towns such as Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare, it shared the same socio-economic profile and civic ambitions. Also, although the Withers family was unusual in its longevity in the precarious business of cinema exhibition, they reflected the broader, industry-wide transition from colourful showman to backroom businessman. This suggests that the history of cinema in Bargoed was not some wayward anomaly, although it is only through multiple local studies that we can build up a reliable comparative picture across regions and nations. Indeed, Maltby et al argue strongly for the scaling up of local studies to create a larger and more complex understanding of the ‘infrastructure of cultural life’.<sup>21</sup> A further challenge of local studies is to shift the analysis beyond the descriptive narrative of daily life and engage with broader social, economic and cultural themes. I have attempted to connect the specific to the conceptual, whilst

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Croll, *Civilising the Urban*; Joe England, Unitarians, Freemasons, Chartists: The Middle Class in Victorian Merthyr, *The Welsh History Review*, vol. 23, no 4. 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Davies, *Secret sins*, p.232.

<sup>21</sup> Maltby, Biltreyest and Meers (eds.), *Explorations in New Cinema History*, p.13.

avoiding too great an interpretative leap, by using the themes discussed above (and explored in more detail in Chapter One) as an analytical framework.

### **A focus on the early years**

The study's time span is deliberately long (some seventy years from the early 1900s to the 1970s) in order to capture the transitions that occurred in the role played by cinema and cinema entrepreneurs within local communities. However, proportionally greater attention is paid to the early years of cinema when acceptance of the medium in the 'face-to-face' communities of the South Wales valleys relied heavily on how effectively cinema's front men were able to integrate themselves and their businesses into the fabric of everyday life. During this *expansive* phase, which ran from the first bioscope shows of the early 1900s to around the end of the World War One, there was a rapid growth in the number of cinemas and cinema proprietors were closely involved in cultivating local civic leaders, supporting important civic projects and actively promoting the community benefits of cinema. I believe the importance of this phase to the embedding of cinema within local communities justifies the dedication of four out of six chapters to the period (excluding Chapters One and Two which provides historiographical and locational context).

Although the persistence of independent cinema ownership in the valleys meant that what might today be termed 'community engagement' remained important to business success until the slump in the popularity of cinema in the 1960s, it weakened over the years due to changes in local socio-economic circumstances, market conditions and the regulatory framework controlling film exhibition as well as the ebb and flow of local opposition. During the inter-war years there was a period of *entrenchment* characterized by economic depression and challenging market conditions, the merger of cinemas into cinema circuits, community contributions focused on 'local distress' and more distant relationships with civic leaders. By the final *establishment* phase, which lasted some twenty years from the Second World War to the early 1960s, cinema was at the height of its popularity, patterns of cinema ownership were more settled, opposition had largely faded away and the need for

community engagement was much diminished. However, high attendance levels were not reflected in increased profit levels. Difficult market conditions continued, indeed were exacerbated as the socio-economic and cultural changes that buffeted the south Wales valleys in the late 1960s and 1970s had a lasting impact on cultural and leisure habits.

## **Sources**

The study draws on a wide range of quantitative and qualitative sources to provide a multi-faceted picture of cinema entrepreneurs, their businesses and their relationships with local communities.

One of the main quantitative sources has been company registration files of dissolved cinema companies held by the National Archives. Companies were obliged to make regular returns to the Registrar of Companies (which became Companies House) and, although the content and survival of these records has varied over the years, and the requirements of public and private companies differ, they provide a key source of biographical data on companies registered in England and Wales. The records generally hold the company's memorandum and articles of association, statement of nominal share capital, location of registered office, register of directors, annual returns containing details of share capital and shareholders and documents relating to liquidation and dissolution. Files also sometimes include company prospectuses, annual balance sheets and correspondence between the company secretary and the Registrar of Companies.

Very little use has previously been made of cinema company records possibly due to the cultural rather than economic orientation of most cinema historiography. And yet company records allow us to identify the individuals behind cinema entrepreneurship and build up an understanding of how enterprises formed, flourished and folded. Taken together they also support a more general appreciation of the extent to which the provision of entertainment had become so thoroughly commercialized by the early twentieth century. During the eleven years from 1910 to 1920, at least forty-three specialist cinema companies were established in the south

Wales valleys, and a detailed quantitative and content analysis of the records of 31 of these companies has been undertaken for this thesis.<sup>22</sup> Annex 1 includes a more detailed description of the company records held by the National Archives and Annex 2 lists the 31 cinema companies whose records have been analysed. In addition, the thesis draws on a number of theatre company records also held at the National Archives.

Another important quantitative source is local authority and police court licensing records. Generated by the regulatory framework that oversaw cinema exhibition, these records provide useful numerical information on the number of cinemas in operation, the number of licenses granted and refused and the conditions that regulatory authorities imposed.

The study also makes extensive use of qualitative sources, principally contemporary newspapers, journals and trade press, memoirs, public administrative records (for example, local authority minutes) and voluntary organisation records (for example, working men's institute records) partly to fill the gaps in the quantitative evidence base and, more importantly, to add texture and depth to the broad-brush strokes of the quantitative analysis. Company records are a crucially important source, but they usually reveal little about the directors who created them beyond the basic demographics of gender, occupation and place of abode. The entrepreneurs are elusive figures barely glimpsed in the shadows thrown by the official returns. Also, some businesses were not registered as companies but operated as sole proprietorships or family businesses meaning they failed to show up on the official radar. Similarly, working men's institutes were registered friendly societies rather than companies, although the South Wales Coalfields Collection at Swansea University holds a comprehensive range of working men's institute records including minutes and accounts.

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<sup>22</sup> This information was drawn from an index of companies registered in England and Wales between 17<sup>th</sup> July 1856 and 30<sup>th</sup> June 1920 held at the National Archives. Although a wide range of search terms was used to identify relevant cinemas, the true number of companies in existence would almost certainly have been higher since some will inevitably have been missed by the search. The National Archives hold records for 35 of the 43 companies identified and the records of 31 companies have been analysed for this study.

Contemporary newspapers are an important source because of the role played by the press in the ‘civic project’. Croll states that by the late 1800s, ‘every self-respecting town possessed its own paper’ and that ‘local newspapers had become increasingly *local* in focus’.<sup>23</sup> As a consequence, they were an ideal medium for the promotion of civic ambitions and the surveillance of inappropriate public behaviour. Andy Croll describes the role played by Harry Southey, the long-time editor of the *Merthyr Express*, who was an ardent supporter of Merthyr Tyfil’s civic advancement and ‘adopted an aggressively pro-booster stance in his editorials’.<sup>24</sup> Whilst the *Merthyr Express* included some Bargoed-based news, the paper’s geographical remit meant that coverage of the town was fairly limited. However, the start-up of the *New Tredegar, Bargoed and Caerphilly Journal* (commonly known as the *Bargoed Journal*) in 1904 gave Bargoed its own dedicated voice. Like Southey in Merthyr, its energetic editor, Percy S. Phillips, was an important ‘civic booster’. He exhibited little editorial reticence in championing causes deemed to support Bargoed’s interests and censoring any negative influences. He became a close ally of the Withers, a relationship no doubt oiled by the regular placement of advertisements in the newspaper. However, Phillips was a business-man first and foremost, and in 1912 he moved the newspaper to Pontypridd in order to tap into a more populous market. As a consequence, the newspaper’s coverage of Bargoed was substantially reduced. Phillips subsequently attempted to sell the printing works at Bargoed to two Bargoed businessmen on the grounds that ‘for some time there has been a feeling existent that the *Bargoed Journal* is not printed in Bargoed and that the proprietor has no local interest because of his non-residence in the town. This has now been overcome. The new firm intends to print and publish the *Bargoed Journal* in BARGOED. It will be a real Bargoed paper for Bargoed people’.<sup>25</sup> However, the deal did not go through possibly because the two businessmen had second thoughts about Phillips’ assertion that ‘Bargoed has a population large enough to support a local paper’. Phillips’ commercial opportunism is illustrated by his multiple business interests which included five local newspapers, stationary and toy sales, a Christmas club and, in 1916, the acquisition of a Porth-based wreath making business.<sup>26</sup> The Withers

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<sup>23</sup> Croll, *Civilising the Urban*, p.90.

<sup>24</sup> Croll, *Civilising the Urban*, p. 43

<sup>25</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1912. Although, in the event, the paper remained under the control of Percy S. Phillips and became more Caerphilly and Pontypridd orientated.

<sup>26</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 16<sup>th</sup> November 1916.

subsequently switched their allegiances to the *Monmouth Guardian* that had increased its coverage of Bargoed news following the *Bargoed Journal's* defection from the town.<sup>27</sup> However, the *Monmouth Guardian* folded in 1919 and thereafter the Withers' courtship of the local press seems to have lost its momentum. From the 1920s, local newspapers had become less useful to cinema entrepreneurs; most had lost their local distinctiveness due to industry mergers and by this time cinema had anyway become less newsworthy.

As mentioned above, I have been fortunate enough to have access to some personal papers that previously belonged to the cinema owner Alfred Withers. These include two annual diaries containing reviews of films viewed by the Withers family, a small number of share certificates, handwritten annual accounts for a couple of cinemas and a large number of family photographs. These papers were acquired through family connections and, once the research for the thesis is complete, will be placed with an appropriate archive.

Whilst taken alone each of these sources has inherent weaknesses, in combination they can provide a more nuanced, multi-layered picture that allows for the triangulation of evidence. This in-depth analysis makes it possible to move beyond generalisations to better understand the complexity of motive and division of interests that sometimes transcended class divisions and how these were negotiated on a daily basis. Where strong quantitative evidence exists (for example, from company records) the analytical lens has been widened to take in the regional picture.

### **Structure of thesis**

The thesis is largely organised chronologically since, as discussed above, the roles played by cinema and cinema entrepreneurs in local communities went through distinct phases over the period under study.

**Chapter One** provides historiographical context. It reviews relevant literature pertaining to the south Wales valleys, cinema, leisure and business/entrepreneurship,

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<sup>27</sup> The full title of the newspaper was the *Monmouth Guardian and Bargoed and Caerphilly Observer*.



drawing out and discussing analytical themes that are further developed throughout the thesis.

**Chapter Two** provides important local background. It describes the socio-economic context for cinema's early incursion into the south Wales valleys, and introduces readers to the study's leading characters, Bargoed and the Withers family.

**Chapter Three** examines the relationship between film exhibition and earlier forms of entertainment in the south Wales valleys, and finds that there were strong connections that greatly eased its assimilation and acceptance.

**Chapter Four** describes the entrepreneurs who were in the vanguard of cinema provision in the south Wales valleys. Firstly, the theatre and music hall proprietors for whom film was a novel and welcome addition to the well established tradition of variety entertainment; secondly, the local businessmen, new to the entertainment business and keen to cash in on the growing popularity of cinema; and, finally, working men's institutes and public halls dipping their toes into the waters of commercial film exhibition in order to reap some of the financial benefits for their institutes and members.

**Chapter Five** examines how cinema was initially received by local 'disciplining forces' – civic leaders determined to up-grade and 'civilize' their towns; state authorities charged with overseeing a new regulatory framework; religious leaders holding the frontline of godliness against increasing secularization; and labour organisations working for the betterment of the working-man.

Within the context of cinema's conflicted status, **Chapter Six** describes the considerable lengths that cinema entrepreneurs went to in order to embed themselves locally and to align their own business interests with those of the wider community. It also describes Bargoed's civic leadership that was responsible for steering an increasingly stringent regulatory framework for film exhibition.

**Chapter Seven** describes the competitive leisure market within which cinemas operated during the interwar years, and the strategies employed by cinema

proprietors to increase their market share in a difficult economic environment. The chapter describes the impact on business longevity and turnover, including how the large number of business failures during the period opened up opportunities for the consolidation of local and regional cinema circuits. The Withers' business not only survived this challenging period, it took advantage of the availability of cinemas at 'knock-down' prices to build up a circuit of some thirty cinemas.

**Chapter Eight** covers the post Second World War years when, in spite of record cinema attendance levels in the 1940s, many south Wales valleys cinemas continued to experience financial difficulties due to escalating costs and competition from an ever-expanding leisure market. Industry exits continued undiminished allowing the Withers to further expand their business that, at the height of its powers, included some fifty cinemas. The chapter also examines the increasingly detached relationships between cinema proprietors and local civic leaders, using Sunday opening as a case study to explore how relationship dynamics played out at the local level.

# Chapter One

## The historiographical landscape

Whilst the topic of cinema entrepreneurship might initially appear tightly delineated, it is clear that in order to fully understand its socio-economic and cultural context and impacts, it is important to locate it within several historiographies, including those of cinema, leisure and the south Wales valleys. This broad historiographical review has created a foundation for the study - providing context, helping to shape the focus and methodology for the research and identifying several important analytical themes that have helped to frame the findings and conclusions. This chapter provides an overview of these literatures and a historiographical rationale for what follows.

### Leisure historiography – a vast and varied terrain

Cinema history itself is located within the vast and varied terrain of leisure historiography and it is important to have an appreciation of this broader context before moving on to more genre-specific ground. The breadth of leisure historiography may explain why there are relatively few overarching histories that take a long-term perspective. An exception is Borsay's *A History of Leisure* which spans an impressive five hundred years 1500 to 2000 and, possibly because of its chronological reach, adopts a thematic approach covering issues of economy, state, class, identity, place, space and time. Given the range of the subject matter, it is understandable that many historians have chosen to focus on specific leisure forms such as sport, music, seaside holidays and, indeed, cinema. Although these studies have the advantage of manageability, many tend to be descriptive, largely chronological narratives that neglect the wider socio-economic and cultural forces that shaped leisure provision and participation. On the other end of what Borsay calls the 'specificity-universality spectrum', some historians have located leisure activities within the broader conceptual construction of culture.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, this can lead to an overly abstract approach that loses sight of the meaning that leisure had as a part of

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Borsay, *A History of Leisure* (Hampshire and New York, 1988), p. xv.

everyday life. This, in essence, is the dilemma facing the leisure historian; the need to be specific enough to locate leisure experiences within the ‘nitty gritty’ of everyday life whilst maintaining the breadth of analysis required to connect with the wider socio-economic and cultural context. Jeffrey Hill talks about the unfortunate dichotomy between social history with the sport left out and sports history with the politics, society and economics left out.<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding this inherent difficulty, a number of genre-specific studies have succeeded in connecting narrative with analysis. For example, Neil Tranter’s *Sport, economy and society in Britain 1750-1914* provides not only a battalion of statistics on participation levels in sport (with a focus on Scotland and Wales), but also explores a range of socio-economic issues including the relationship between change and continuity in sporting practices, class relations and the questionable role of sport as a ‘social conciliator’.<sup>3</sup> Other leisure studies have achieved connectivity by focusing on a specific period, place or group. For example, Claire Langhamer has written about women and leisure,<sup>4</sup> Robert James about working class culture in the 1930s,<sup>5</sup> and Andrew Davies about working class culture in Manchester and Salford between 1900 and 1939.<sup>6</sup>

A number of themes that emerge from leisure historiography are relevant to this study. One of the most important is the development of a mass market for leisure towards the end of the nineteenth century, of which cinema was to become the archetypal form.<sup>7</sup> A number of historians have described how industrialisation and urbanisation combined to create a dynamic market for commercial leisure.<sup>8</sup> More specifically, the growth in large concentrated urban populations, increased disposable

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<sup>2</sup> Jeff Hill, *Sport, Leisure and Culture in Twentieth Century Britain* (New York, 2002), p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Tranter, *Sport, economy and society in Britain, 1750-1914* (Cambridge, 1998)

<sup>4</sup> Claire Langhamer, *Women’s Leisure in England, 1920-1960* (Manchester and New York, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Robert James, *Popular Culture and Working Class Taste in Britain, 1930-1939: A Round of Cheap Diversions* (Manchester, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working class culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900-1939* (Buckingham and Philadelphia, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> The concept of the commercialization of leisure has been applied to earlier periods. For example, J. H. Plumb argues that the commercialization of leisure was one of the ‘incontestable signs of growing affluence in eighteenth century British society’ (*The commercialization of leisure in eighteenth century England*, 1973), but there is general consensus that the late nineteenth century saw commercialization enter a new mass-market era.

<sup>8</sup> For example, James Walvin, *Leisure and Society, 1830-1950* (New York, 1978); Peter Borsay, *A History of Leisure* (Hampshire and New York, 1988); Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge, 1998); Hugh Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution, c1780-c1880* (London, 1980); Stephen Jones, *Workers at Play: A Social and Economic History of Leisure, 1918-1939* (London, 1986).

incomes, shorter working hours, paid holidays and improved transport proved to be a potent, market-shifting mix. Between 1851 and 1901 real incomes doubled, and by the middle of the nineteenth century the majority of the United Kingdom population was living in urban areas.<sup>9</sup> A number of commentators have drawn attention to the elemental influence of population increases during this period.<sup>10</sup> Although the middle class became proportionately more important between 1851 and 1901 (increasing from 13% to 25%, compared with a reduction in the working class population from 87% to 74%), the scale of the increase in the number of working class people is striking, from 18 million to 27 million.<sup>11</sup> Individually working class people may have had relatively little to spend, but collectively this ‘plebian consumer power’ could create (and destroy) consumer markets, including that for cinema.<sup>12</sup> For many working class people, life expectations had moved beyond self-sufficiency to a requirement for novelty and amusement. Walvin writes that Booth’s final survey of the London poor undertaken in the 1930s registered this major change in social attitudes. ‘Amongst other things it was noted that poorer people in the capital began to ask a new question in life. To “what shall we eat, what drink and wherewithal shall we be clothed?” must now be added the question, “How shall we be amused?”’<sup>13</sup>

Few historians have placed the development of a mass-market for leisure within a wider consumer revolution, although there is considerable overlap between their historical narratives - for example, both have definitional and chronological challenges and both also wrestle with the perennial issue of the extent to which consumers had agency in a market-orientated system. One exception is Benson who uses case studies of shopping, tourism and sport to examine the rise of consumer society in Britain between 1880 and 1980.<sup>14</sup> Consumerism is an important context for cinema since what was shown on the screen could have a major impact on

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<sup>9</sup> John Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain 1880-1980* (London and New York, 1994), p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Peter Mathias, *First Industrial Nation: Economic History of Britain, 1700-1914*, third edition (London, 2001); John Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain 1880-1980* (London and New York, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society*, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> Walvin, *Leisure and Society*, p. 68.

<sup>13</sup> Walvin, *Leisure and Society*, p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society*

consumption habits.<sup>15</sup> Film has been described as a ‘window on other worlds’, but it was also increasingly a shop window for a variety of aspirational life-styles.

Although there is an overall consensus within leisure historiography that the late nineteenth century saw a transformation in leisure provision, a number of historians argue that entry into this mass leisure market was a ‘patchy and protracted phenomenon’.<sup>16</sup> The new world of leisure was not available equally to all working class people since the constraints and opportunities afforded by class, age, gender and geography were bound to be replicated in leisure. Bailey argues that the enjoyment of new leisure opportunities was most obvious amongst young working class wage earners.<sup>17</sup> Andrew Davies’ analysis of working class leisure in Salford and Manchester between 1900 and 1939 concludes that class was often a less potent influence on leisure habits than other factors such as poverty, gender and generation.<sup>18</sup> He found that although many working class people did buy into commercial forms of leisure, other arenas for leisure, such as local streets, markets and parks, were more important. Claire Langhamer draws on oral history interviews to better understand the meaning that leisure had for women.<sup>19</sup> She examines informal as well as formal leisure pursuits and concludes that experience and meaning depended heavily on life cycle stage - for example, the importance of certain leisure pursuits during courtship. Within the context of this study, it is also germane to note that although women’s leisure leaned towards the informal and home-based especially following marriage, cinema-going was an important exception. Many women continued to ‘go to the pictures’ throughout their lives, sometimes alone, other times with their partner and/or children.<sup>20</sup>

Whether the consequence of choice or necessity, it is clear that many traditional entertainment forms persisted in spite of the incursion of commercial alternatives. The change versus continuity debate, that has preoccupied leisure

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<sup>15</sup> For example, Robert James, *Popular Culture and Working-class Taste in Britain 1930-39: A round of cheap diversions?* (Manchester, 2010), p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> Walvin, *Leisure and Society*, p. 66.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Bailey, ‘The Politics and Poetics of Modern British Leisure: A late twentieth-century review’, *Rethinking History*, 1999, Vol. 3 (2), pp.131-175.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty; Working class culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900–1939* (Buckingham and Philadelphia, 1992).

<sup>19</sup> Claire Langhamer, *Women’s Leisure in England, 1920-1960* (Manchester and New York, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Langhamer, *Women’s Leisure in England*, p. 165.

historiography for many years, has settled into an overall acceptance that there were significant continuities in how people amused themselves in spite of the major changes wrought by industrialisation and urbanisation. Cunningham writes that ‘there is no longer much support for the view that the industrial revolution was a cataclysmic force which destroyed in its entirety a self contained world of pre-industrial leisure and replaced it with new recreations more suited to an urban and industrial society’.<sup>21</sup> Most historians with an interest in leisure concur.<sup>22</sup> Many traditional, self-generated leisure activities continued unabated or evolved to fit new circumstances. Andrew Davies suggests that one of the reasons that these more informal leisure pursuits have received less scholarly attention is the meager documentary trail they have left.<sup>23</sup> Although the case for continuity is now broadly accepted, there is nevertheless recognition that change and continuity are not mutually exclusive concepts and that, notwithstanding the endurance of many leisure habits, there have undoubtedly been a number of pivotal periods in the history of leisure. In his review of leisure historiography Bailey writes that from the ‘staggered rhythms of change and continuity’ there is little doubt that the last quarter of the nineteenth century emerges as a key transitional stage.<sup>24</sup>

The rapid expansion in commercialised leisure could only occur because many working class entertainments, such as music hall and popular theatre, which were precursors to cinema, had become more socially acceptable. A number of commentators have attributed the growing acceptance of new forms of popular entertainment to a process of ‘cultural embourgeoisement’ that tamed the more unruly elements of working class culture thereby eroding working class consciousness. For example, Stedman Jones has written that an increasing addiction to the consolations of a new leisure world led to a ‘dilution of any widespread class combativity among

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<sup>21</sup> Hugh Cunningham, ‘Leisure and Culture’ in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.) *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950, Volume 2: People and their Environment* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 336.

<sup>22</sup> For example, Bailey, ‘The Politics and Poetics of Modern British Leisure: A late twentieth-century review’, *Rethinking History*, 1999, Vol. 3 (2), p.p.131-175; Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty; Working class culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900-1939* (Buckingham and Philadelphia, 1992); Neil Tranter, *Sport, economy and society in Britain, 1750-1914* (Cambridge, 1998); Peter Borsay, *A History of Leisure*, (Hampshire and New York, 1988).

<sup>23</sup> Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty*, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> Bailey, ‘The Politics and Poetics of Modern British Leisure: A late twentieth-century review’, *Rethinking History*, 1999, Vol. 3 (2), pp.131-175.

workers'.<sup>25</sup> Chanan, meanwhile, posits that the bourgeoisie knew, 'at least instinctively, that a class builds its self-confidence and acquires the means for its political advancement by mastering, as they themselves had done, the means for its own cultural expression; and that therefore to suppress such self-expression in the working class was a crucial part of guaranteeing their subordination' and goes on to conjecture whether this social control was consciously directed or unconscious conditioning.<sup>26</sup> During the mid to late nineteenth century, there had certainly been many middle class attempts to influence the leisure habits of the working classes. Bailey has written about how the Victorian work orientated culture led to nervousness about the increased amounts of leisure time available to the working classes. Leisure represented a 'dangerous frontier zone beyond the law and order of respectable society', an 'invitation to idleness and dissolution'.<sup>27</sup> 'Rational recreation' was an attempt by middle class activists to provide an alternative world of leisure that would 'immunise workers against the alleged degenerations of their own culture and counter the more corrupt appeals of an embryonic leisure industry'.<sup>28</sup> In addition to attempting to divert people away from drinking and gambling by providing morally superior counter-attractions (such as penny readings, temperance cafes and lending libraries) many activists had grander social reform ambitions. Meller has written that many 'socio-religious groups' believed that enjoying recreation together would restore a sense of community amongst different classes and improve the quality of life of the urban masses.<sup>29</sup>

However, middle class attempts to reform or 'civilise' working class culture were doomed to failure. The reformers simply could not compete with the new levels of invention and sophistication of commercial entertainment providers. Weak tea and a moralizing lecture did not draw the crowds like a 'Grand Variety and Bioscope Show'. Additionally, entertainment entrepreneurs had 'cleaned up their act'. Increased demand together with technological innovation facilitated the development of new, larger-scale theatres and music halls in many British cities. With increased

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<sup>25</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Working class culture and working class politics in London, 1870-1900; notes on the remaking of a working class', *Journal of Social History*, vii (1974), pp. 460-508.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks: The pre-history and early years of cinema in Britain* (London, Boston and Henley, 1980), p. 42.

<sup>27</sup> Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England*, p. 177.

<sup>28</sup> Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England*, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Helen Meller, *Leisure and the Changing City 1870-1914* (London, 1976).



scale came greater formality and organisation. Bailey, who has written extensively on the history of popular culture in the Victorian period,<sup>30</sup> has described how a new generation of music hall proprietors sought to maximize profits by appealing to as wide an audience as possible. Most crucially they banned the sale of alcohol, and also up-graded and expanded the capacity of their halls, booked better quality artistes, introduced more family-orientated entertainment (such as Christmas pantomimes) and adopted a language aimed at soothing the middle classes who had hitherto frowned on music hall entertainment because of its associations with drunkenness, bawdiness and prostitution. ‘Elegant’, ‘respectable’, ‘safe’ and ‘educative’ were the new promotional by-words of music hall/theatre proprietors. Films were promoted for their educative value and the strong association of film with one of its technical precursors, the lantern show, greatly helped in terms of image management. Lanterns shows had been used for many years to illustrate talks and lectures. Chanan claims that, unlike most other entertainments, lantern shows had a strong educative element and ‘reached beyond the confines of any particular class’, into the heart of existing institutions such as the school and church.<sup>31</sup> And so the new respectability of theatre was not a result of the reforming zeal of activists; it was, rather, a commercial necessity. Meller argues that the growing respectability of theatres and music halls is not evidence of the capitulation of music hall proprietors in the face of opposition, but was rather an indication of their new ability to reach large numbers of people.<sup>32</sup> Commercial entertainment gained the status of respectability with little reference to middle class ideology. Chanan concurs, writing that ‘in the last two decades of the century the commercialization of leisure and the impact of technology impressed themselves more deeply on leisure and popular culture than any social reform campaign’.<sup>33</sup>

The debate over what powered the transformation of working class leisure from the disreputable to the (at least) socially tolerable, touches on an important tension in leisure historiography, that of structure versus agency. That is the extent to which leisure consumers (the focus generally being on the working classes) actively

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<sup>30</sup> For example, Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational recreation and the contest for control, 1830-1885*, (London and New York, 1978); Peter Bailey (ed.), *Music Hall: The business of pleasure* (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia, 1986); Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>31</sup> Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks*, p. 47

<sup>32</sup> Meller, *Leisure and the Changing City*, p. 124.

<sup>33</sup> Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks*, p. 188

influenced their leisure experiences or were the docile recipients of profit-driven mass entertainment or the reforming agendas of various voluntary and statutory agencies. Bailey has written that most interpretative issues in leisure history arise from the key questions of agency and structure, the role of class and its conflicts and relationships.<sup>34</sup> Although the agency versus structure dichotomy can be useful in teasing out conceptual dispositions, relatively few historical accounts are located at these polar extremes. From as early as the 1960s, Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson were investing culture and its human subjects with a significant measure of agency and power,<sup>35</sup> and the great majority of more recent studies acknowledge that the process of consuming (and producing) cultural goods is an interactive process. For example, in 1980 Cunningham wrote that he was confident that ‘few would now adhere to a crude social control interpretation of the history of leisure; rather, leisure is perceived as a field of contention and negotiation in which the outcome was neither the submission of subordinate groups to new standards nor an untrammelled celebration of class identity’.<sup>36</sup> Further, Bailey argues that because the strongest theoretical influence in social history is cultural rather than structural, most historical accounts give the working class some degree of agency.<sup>37</sup> However, important differences still arise due to the extent to which historical accounts are underpinned by theory, the amount of agency afforded historical subjects and how that agency plays out, including the complex interplay of collective identities, such as class, gender, age, race and working status, that determine life chances and experiences.

The perception of leisure as a site for intra-class as well as inter-class conflict and conciliation has generated a rich research agenda and is an important context for this study. The role of middle class activists in promoting ‘rational recreation’ in the poverty- stricken inner city slums of the mid to late nineteenth century has been discussed above. Although commercial entertainment had successfully shed the worst aspects of its disreputable reputation, pockets of disapproval and even active resistance persisted until the middle of the twentieth century. Objections were wide-

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<sup>34</sup> Peter Bailey, ‘The Politics and Poetics of Modern British Leisure: A late twentieth-century review’, *Rethinking History*, 1999, Vol. 3 (2), pp.131-175.

<sup>35</sup> Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution*, p. 335.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Bailey, ‘The Politics and Poetics of Modern British Leisure: A late twentieth-century review’, *Rethinking History*, 1999, Vol. 3 (2), pp.131-175.

ranging and included the moral, intellectual, political and economic. Mass leisure was perceived to undermine a number of idealized models of behavior, including that of the good citizen. Bailey writes that up until the end of World War One commercialised leisure was seen in some quarters as a threat to national efficiency at work and war, whilst the inter-war years, in contrast, were characterised by an ‘intellectual and aesthetic distaste’ for the perceived Americanisation of leisure. He quotes Aldous Huxley’s biting criticism of mainstream cinema as ‘the purest cat’s piss’.<sup>38</sup> James also argues that there was ‘elite scrutiny’ of commercial leisure in the 1930s motivated by concerns of cultural ‘dumbing down’ and the erosion of political awareness.<sup>39</sup> In his analysis of male leisure from 1880 to 1945, Beavan describes a number of conflicts that reflected fluctuating notions of citizenship.<sup>40</sup> Using Coventry as a case study, Beavan argues that young men came under intense scrutiny during the period 1870 to 1914. Their growing interest in escapist ‘low grade’ entertainment and other consumerist distractions was attributed to the increase in the number of semi-skilled, monotonous jobs in new industries. At the individual level there were concerns that such interests were awakening ‘low passions’ and trapping youths in an ‘immoral framework’, whilst at the national level there was anxiety over the ‘stock of Britain’s youth’ and the future of Empire.<sup>41</sup> Beavan also discusses politically radical criticism of modern leisure that mixed ‘a disapproval of commercial leisure based on its close ties to capitalism with a more traditional critique rooted in a desire to explain “pleasure seeking” through the moral deficiencies of the individual’. Such concerns were not the sole preserve of radical movements but were shared, to varying degrees, across the political spectrum.<sup>42</sup>

Possibly the most vociferous opposition came from religious and voluntary organisations with a strong moral agenda. Although many working class theatres and music halls had gone ‘dry’ in their bid to become more respectable, the well-established temperance movement, that drew support from across the social spectrum, continued to scrutinize commercial leisure operations. However, the focus for religious approbation increasingly focused on Sunday opening. Objections to Sunday

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<sup>38</sup> Peter Bailey, ‘The Politics and Poetics of Modern British Leisure: A late twentieth-century review’, *Rethinking History*, 1999, Vol. 3 (2), pp.131-175.

<sup>39</sup> James, *Popular Culture and Working Class Taste in Britain*.

<sup>40</sup> Beavan, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working Class Men in Britain* (Manchester, 2009).

<sup>41</sup> Beavan, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working Class Men*, pp. 8, 106.

<sup>42</sup> Beavan, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working Class Men*, pp. 47-48.

opening were certainly not new. Since the early 1800s, Sabbatarians had opposed all secular activities on Sundays even if they were of a 'rational' nature. Cunningham writes that many commentators at the time, including Charles Dickens, believed that the removal under pressure of more positive counter-attractions had led to an increase in intemperance.<sup>43</sup> Whilst Sabbatarian objections to the Sunday opening of national cultural institutions had weakened by the turn of the twentieth century (the British Museum and National Gallery opened to the public on Sundays in 1896) there was still considerable hostility to the availability on the Sabbath of more frivolous amusements, such as popular theatre and cinema.

Another important player, especially at the local level, was the state in its various manifestations, including county councils, local authorities, police forces and magistrates' courts. Historians have attributed a range of motives to their interventions, from the utilitarian to the ideological. Undoubtedly, much involvement was primarily practical, aimed at improving the physical health and safety of local communities - for example, the use of various regulations and by-laws to reduce overcrowding and improve fire safety in theatres and cinemas. However, there was also a strong ideological or moral imperative driving local authorities to both make direct provision (in the shape, for example, of libraries, parks and swimming pools) and to use their powers to oversee commercial entertainment provision. In many areas, local authorities replaced voluntary organisations in the vanguard of the campaign to up-grade urban areas. Mellor describes the 'municipalisation' in Bristol at the end of the nineteenth century of various cultural institutions, such as library, museum and art gallery, that had been created through voluntary endeavour. The guiding motive according to Mellor was twofold; firstly, there was an aim to provide 'worthy' recreations that would elevate residents and communities; and secondly there was intense competition with other towns and cities to create the model municipality.<sup>44</sup>

At the time there were well-developed ideas of what constituted the 'ideal' city or town, including the types of buildings, services and governance arrangements it should have. Council leaders were determined to make their cities as impressive as

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<sup>43</sup> Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution*, p. 86.

<sup>44</sup> Mellor, *Leisure and the Changing City*

possible and the models were often the great cities of the ancient world. Jeff Hill writes that the drive to enhance the civic status of towns and cities extended into the twentieth century and that relatively small towns shared these municipal ambitions.<sup>45</sup> In the early 1900s many south Wales towns were still developing and there was a strong impetus to acquire the civic infrastructure and status befitting a growing ‘metropolis’. Croll has vividly described this ‘civilising’ process in relation to Merthyr Tydfil.<sup>46</sup> If valleys towns were to establish their civic credentials, two key conditions had to be met. Firstly the town needed appropriate civic infrastructure and services; secondly, the towns-people needed to exhibit ‘civilised’ attitudes and behavior. In this context, the development of a new theatre or cinema was generally viewed positively, as an important civic embellishment. Tranter similarly argues that sport was used as a community bonding and boosting agent, especially in areas that were undergoing considerable change.<sup>47</sup> Bailey writes that at the local level there was ‘a diverse field of embattled interests cutting across class lines’ and that although the state’s relationship with commercial leisure interests was often ‘ambiguous’, in many cases there was considerable identity of interest between business and local government.<sup>48</sup>

A major gap in leisure historiography is the role of the small-scale leisure entrepreneur. In much leisure historiography commercialization is portrayed as an unstoppable, impersonal and homogeneous force, existing in conceptual opposition to earlier more organic, class specific leisure forms and to initiatives aimed at self-improvement and good citizenry. As a consequence of this polarization and, what one commentator has described as leisure historiography’s ‘tinge of disappointment [that an] authentic working class culture was replaced by a mass culture shorn of its class identity’, the commercialization of leisure has not been examined in any detail.<sup>49</sup> Benson argues that consumerism has been neglected as a subject for scholarly attention for similar reasons.<sup>50</sup> There is also a commonly held assumption that big business relatively rapidly took over most commercial leisure provision and, since

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<sup>45</sup> Hill, *Sport, Leisure and Culture*, p.168.

<sup>46</sup> Croll, *Civilising the Urban*

<sup>47</sup> Tranter, *Sport, Economy and Society*, pp. 54-57.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Bailey, ‘The Politics and Poetics of Modern British Leisure: A late twentieth-century review,’ *Rethinking History*, 1999, Vol. 3 (2), pp.131-175.

<sup>49</sup> Beavan, *Leisure, citizenship and working class men*, pp. 44-45

<sup>50</sup> Beavan, *Leisure, citizenship and working class men*, pp. 44-45

this capitalist mode of production holds little analytical interest for most leisure historians whose interests are primarily social and cultural, commercial leisure provision lies in an overlooked corner of the historiographical field. Yeo and Yeo, for example, describe how liberal capitalism gave way to monopoly capitalism in leisure provision and the consumer experience shifted from ‘membership’ mode to ‘pay at the gate’ mode.<sup>51</sup> They argue that the supply side of the market came to dictate provision and that as a consequence citizens become powerless consumers. However, this analysis underestimates the role that small-scale entrepreneurs continued to play in many locations, the interactive relationships they had within local communities and the degree of choice exercised by consumers. In his review of leisure historiography, Bailey makes an important distinction between the commercial and capitalist, arguing that the provision of leisure was commercial in nature and very different from the capitalist production of, say, coal.<sup>52</sup> Asa Briggs was one of the first historians to recognize the importance of commercial leisure provision arguing that in order to understand contemporary society and economy it was necessary to understand the modern entertainment industry. His call in 1960 for research that focused on ‘the fascinating but formidable areas of modern society where commerce touches questions of taste, discrimination and, deeper still, human values’ has only very partially been answered.<sup>53</sup>

A number of studies have more recently turned their attention to commercial leisure provision,<sup>54</sup> and whilst the canon of work may be relatively small it nevertheless raises a number of issues relevant to this study. One important theme is the amount of overlap that existed between the various leisure sectors. Cunningham writes that the public and private sectors ‘worked hand in hand’ and that it was often difficult to say where one ended and the other began. He uses the examples of the Crystal Palace (which was publicly owned but was leased to a private company) and publicly funded railways (that operated commercial excursions to prize fights, fairs

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<sup>51</sup> Eileen Janes Yeo and Stephen Yeo, *Popular culture and class conflict 1590-1914: explorations in the history of labour and leisure* (1981).

<sup>52</sup> Peter Bailey, ‘The Politics and Poetics of Modern British Leisure: A late twentieth-century review’, *Rethinking History*, 1999, Vol. 3 (2), pp.131-175.

<sup>53</sup> Briggs, *Mass Entertainment: The Origins of a Modern Industry*.

<sup>54</sup> For example, Stephen Jones, *Workers at Play: A Social and Economic History of Leisure 1918-1939* (London, 1986); Hugh Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution c1780-c1880* (London, 1980); Neil Tranter, *Sport, Economy and Society in Britain, 1750-1914* (Cambridge, 1998).

and even hangings because ‘demand was irresistible’) to demonstrate the willingness of public agencies to run commercial operations.<sup>55</sup> Conversely, a number of commentators argue that much commercial leisure provision was ‘profit-seeking’ rather than ‘profit maximizing’, since it was important for commercial ventures to gain and retain the support of local communities and some entrepreneurs had strong personal connections to their ‘trade’.<sup>56</sup> Another theme is the considerable competition that existed not only between commercial ventures but also between public, private and voluntary sectors. As Tranter writes, the leisure industry was more subject than most to ‘the vagaries of consumer choice and fierce inter-firm rivalry’ and that it is therefore only to be expected that many companies were short-lived.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Borsay posits that entertainment enterprises stood at ‘the more volatile and risky end of the business spectrum as the products it traded in were subject to fluctuations in taste and fashion’.<sup>58</sup> It is also important to note that it was not unusual for voluntary organisations to adopt a hard-nosed, competitive approach that could rival that of their commercial counter-parts.<sup>59</sup>

As we have seen, most historians assign leisure consumers with at least some capacity or ‘agency’ to shape their leisure experiences and yet there has been relatively little research undertaken on the differential experiences and impacts that this has given rise to. Most of the differences identified are attributed primarily to class. Cunningham, for example, talks of a variety of leisure cultures that are ‘not hermetically sealed against each other’ but overlap and influence each other.<sup>60</sup> However, these differentiated cultures are mainly class based. Similarly, although Bailey recognizes the diversity of influences on leisure experiences and outcomes, he nevertheless argues that ‘class remains the more potent vectors of difference however indeterminate or relativized’ the concept might be.<sup>61</sup> Whilst class is undoubtedly the canvas on which leisure experiences and meanings are drawn, there are other

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<sup>55</sup> Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution*, p. 164.

<sup>56</sup> Tranter, *Sport, Economy and Society*; Borsay, *A History of Leisure*, p. 39.

<sup>57</sup> Tranter, *Sport, Economy and Society*, p. 75.

<sup>58</sup> Borsay, *A History of Leisure*, p. 37.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, Stephen Ridgwell, ‘South Wales and the cinema in the 1930s’, *Welsh History Review*, 17:4 (December, 1995), pp. 590-615; Robert James, “‘A Very Profitable Enterprise’: South Wales Miners’ Institute Cinemas in the 1930’s,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 27:1 (2007), pp. 27-61.

<sup>60</sup> Hugh Cunningham, ‘Leisure and Culture’ in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.) *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950, Volume 2: People and their Environment* (Cambridge, 1990)

<sup>61</sup> Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*, p.5.

individual and collective attributes that provide colour, shape and texture to the canvas. As discussed above, leisure historiography has already asserted the importance of characteristics such as gender, race, generation and working status in addition to class. However, woven through these major socio-demographic strata are more elusive sub-strata (such as notions of respectability and modernity) that could be just as potent in forming identities and associations and shaping experiences. A number of historians have commented on the amount of choice exercised by leisure consumers during the twentieth century, and the amount of market differentiation this gave rise to.<sup>62</sup> Working class culture and leisure were not homogenous. It was possible to adopt a variety of identities that went beyond those ascribed by class, race, gender and generation, and these identities were far from fixed.

Bailey introduces the ‘cultural anti-hero’ Bill Banks, a London railway-man, to illustrate the agency exercised by the working class in reformulating the ‘clearly recognized and much exalted contemporary ideal of respectability’.<sup>63</sup> Although the majority of working class people, by most common-sense definitions, could be described as respectable, Bailey argues that respectability did not exist statically, imposed from above, but could be assumed and discarded depending on the situational context. During the course of a day’s outing, Bill Banks, decked out in his ‘best dress’, travels with his wife and friends in a hired van complete with cornet player to the refined setting of Hampton Court where they have a first rate lunch. However, flushed with drink, Banks scuffles with a young shop-man in their company who appears to have ‘superior airs’. Peace eventually restored, the party returns to London and spends a late night at a well-known music-hall, finally returning home in a cab ‘enjoying the prospect of scandalizing the neighbours by arriving in such style’. Bailey argues that the co-existence of seemingly contradictory modes of behavior suggests ‘the readiness with which working men could turn the tables on their betters by the calculated performance of different roles that exploited the fragmented milieu of big city life’. Identity had become an increasingly complex concept and people ever more shaped their identities, both individually and collectively, through leisure

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<sup>62</sup> For example, Peter Bailey, ‘The Politics and Poetics of Modern British Leisure: A late twentieth-century review’, *Rethinking History*, 1999, Vol. 3 (2), pp.131-175.

<sup>63</sup> *Bill Banks’ Day Out*, a ‘suggestive piece of documentary fiction,’ written by Thomas Wright, was published in 1868. Bailey recalls the story in Chapter 2 of *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*.



activities rather than work and religion.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, a small number of commentators go as far as arguing that the growing complexity of cultural capital heightened intra-class variations whilst blurring inter-class differences,<sup>65</sup> although most historians would baulk at the analytical status of class being so comprehensively downgraded.

Within the context of the growing differentiation of leisure markets and experiences, a number of historians have drawn attention to the neglect of impacts at the individual level. James, for example, argues that many histories of leisure treat audiences as passive and do not offer any ‘real understanding of what leisure actually meant to those consuming it’. Historians remain ‘grimly silent on main function of leisure – pleasure’ when what is needed is a ‘rich and nuanced account of the complexity of the consumer response’.<sup>66</sup> Whilst this study does not attempt to explore consumer experiences at the individual or collective levels, the context of an increasingly diverse, knowledgeable and competitive leisure market is highly pertinent to the study’s objectives. Cinema entrepreneurs needed a detailed knowledge of the lives, attitudes and preferences of their audiences in order to tailor their ‘offer’ and maximize demand. Asa Briggs writes about entrepreneurs’ efforts to remain ahead of the game, to search out ‘fresh ideas’ and ‘new formulas and formats’.<sup>67</sup> James argues that the relationship between entrepreneur and audience was a reciprocal one in which ‘the agency of both parties was continually negotiated’ and ‘neither was ever wholly dominant’.<sup>68</sup>

### **Towards a new cinema history**

Turning now to cinema historiography, it is immediately clear that whilst there are considerable overlaps of interest with leisure historiography, the former has only relatively recently engaged with the important analytical issues discussed above. The different origins of the two historiographies provide an explanation. Whilst leisure history is rooted in the growing interest in social history that emerged in the 1960s, cinema (or, more accurately, film) history is much more akin to literary analysis,

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<sup>64</sup> Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution*, p.339.

<sup>65</sup> For example, Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain*

<sup>66</sup> James, *Popular Culture and Working Class Taste in Britain*, p. 4.

<sup>67</sup> Briggs, *Mass Entertainment: The Origins of a Modern Industry*, p. 29.

<sup>68</sup> James, *Popular Culture and Working Class Taste in Britain*, p. 6.

focusing on films as text and neglecting ‘anything that existed outside the text and beyond the edges of the screen’. The emphasis on textual interpretation or decoding has been criticized for several reasons. Maltby, amongst others, argues that film history deliberately selects films with the most ‘allegorical or symptomatic representational meaning’ for post hoc analysis whilst ignoring more popular film output. He goes on to write that ‘film history has been written almost in its entirety without regard to, and often with a deliberate distaste for, the box office’. Further, it ignores the ‘constant traffic’ in films viewed by the public that created little opportunity to leave a lasting impression.<sup>69</sup> Audiences are imagined as captive and captivated creatures of the text, ‘stumbling into the theatre out of nowhere...and then vanishing back out into the crowded street and a life imagined chiefly as the place that the escapist is escaping from, not as a life furnished with other media, other pressures, or other people’.<sup>70</sup>

Thus the experience of cinema is reduced to an individual act of textual engagement that neglects the wider social, economic, cultural and other forces that influence not only cinema film spectatorship but also the wider cinema-going experience. This deficit was recognized as early as the beginning of the 1980s although, as we shall see below, it took until the early 2000s for it to be systematically addressed.<sup>71</sup> Phillip Corrigan’s chapter on the nature of film viewing experiences, included in *British Cinema History* published in 1983, includes one of the earliest calls for a more nuanced audience perspective. He argues that this perspective is ‘almost completely undeveloped, even unconsidered’ and when it does receive attention it tends to be reduced to ‘two unequal parts – a mass of consumers and a minority of critics’.<sup>72</sup>

Another major strand in cinema history focuses on film production, usually providing a chronological narrative of the various stages of technical development such as sound, colour and widescreen formats, that are perceived to be key historical

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<sup>69</sup> Maltby, Biltereyst and Meers (eds.), *Explorations in New Cinema History*, pp. 7-9.

<sup>70</sup> Kate Bowles, ‘Limit of maps?: Locality and cinema-going in Australia’, *Media International Australia*, 131 (May 2009), p. 84.

<sup>71</sup> Although *Mass-Observation at the Movies* edited by Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan (London and New York, 1987) analyses data on cinema-going collected as part of the Mass Observation project between 1939 and 1945.

<sup>72</sup> James Curran and Vincent Porter, *British Cinema History* (London, 1983), p. 24.

markers. In a contribution to *British Cinema History*, Raymond Williams criticizes this linear and technologically deterministic view, arguing that it ignores the fact that film and cinema exist within the context of more general social and cultural processes.<sup>73</sup>

Another weakness in much cinema historiography is the lack of attention paid to cinema exhibition in the film production-consumption chain. Most of the work that has been undertaken on film exhibition focuses on the major cinema chains, Gaumont, Associated British Cinemas (ABC) and the Odeon, which is understandable given that by 1951 these three chains accounted for a third of all cinema seats in Britain.<sup>74</sup> Cinema historians have viewed small-scale exhibitors as an irrelevance because they were unable to exert any influence over film producers or distributors. As one commentator has written, ‘...as for the independent showman with one or more theatres, he is at the far end of the queue and must bide his time until crumbs fall from the rich man’s table’.<sup>75</sup> Miskell argues that viewing film exhibition from the perspective of film production has meant that the relationships that small-scale exhibitors had with their audiences and local communities have been overlooked.<sup>76</sup>

Since the late 1990s, however, there has been an important shift in the direction of cinema history. The work of Kuhn and others not only ‘reconfirmed ideas of audience activity, selectivity and power in an historical context, but also underlined the extent to which cinema-going was remembered as part of the fabric and routine of social life’.<sup>77</sup> Kuhn identified three types of cinema memory, the largest category relating to the activity of cinema going as a communal activity.<sup>78</sup> She argues that only occasionally did films have ‘land-mark status’, more usually they faded into the background of the overall cultural and social experience. As another historian has remarked, cinema-going was ‘a social act performed by people of flesh and blood,

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<sup>73</sup> James Curran and Vincent Porter, *British Cinema History* (London, 1983), p. 112.

<sup>74</sup> For example, Allen Eyles has written extensively on the history of the major cinema circuits, including *ABC: The first name in entertainment* (1993); *Odeon Cinemas: From J. Arthur Rank to the Multiplex v.2* (2005); *The Granada Theatres* (1998).

<sup>75</sup> Ernest Betts, *The Film Business: A History of British Cinema, 1896-1972* (London, 1973), p.79.

<sup>76</sup> Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>77</sup> Biltereyst, Maltby and Meers (eds.), *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity*, p.3.

<sup>78</sup> Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London, 2002).

who actually engaged with movies and with other people, firmly situated within specific social, cultural, historical and spatial confines'.<sup>79</sup>

By the mid 2000s there was sufficient 'critical mass and methodological maturity' to name this developing body of work 'new cinema history'.<sup>80</sup> One of the first collections to be published under this banner was *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, published in 2007 and based on papers presented to a 2003 conference.<sup>81</sup> Often multi-disciplinary and multi-method, this new 'brand' of cinema history is concerned not only with the socio-cultural history of audiences but also the role played by cinema as a cultural institution. These two inter-related themes were further developed in two compilations *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and case studies* published in 2011 and *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: New perspectives on European cinema history* published in 2012. Further work on the social context of cinema-going, which Kuhn and others started in the late 1990s, has confirmed that audiences were hugely heterogeneous, and that experiences and meanings depended on a range of social, economic, demographic, cultural and political pre-conditions. The importance of locating cinema audiences specifically in time and space is emphasized; indeed, many of the studies within the 'new cinema history' school are very finely grained focusing on specific towns and even venues.<sup>82</sup> The 'new cinema history' also extends its gaze to the previously over-looked cinema entrepreneurs and the part they played within local communities, including how they responded to their 'competent, active and selective customers'.<sup>83</sup> An important context for this role was the drive for 'modernity' that was gripping not only metropolitan areas but also smaller towns at the time of cinema's 'coming of age'. Biltreyst et al argue that any definition of modernity needs to recognize the inherent ambivalences in which 'counterforces or alternative traditions of modernity compete with hegemonic or culturally dominant forms'.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Biltreyst, Maltby and Meers (eds.), *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity*, p.2.

<sup>80</sup> Maltby, Biltreyst and Meers (eds.), *Explorations in New Cinema History*, p.3.

<sup>81</sup> Maltby, Stokes and Allen (eds.) *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema* (Exeter, 2007).

<sup>82</sup> For example, John Sedgwick, 'Patterns in First-Run and Suburban Film going in Sydney in the mid-1930s' and Tim Snelson and Mark Jancovich, "'No Hits, No Runs, Just Terrors'"; Exhibition, Cultural Distinctions and Cult Audiences at the Rialto Cinema in the 1930s and 1940s,' in Maltby, Biltreyst and Meers (eds.), *Explorations in New Cinema History*.

<sup>83</sup> Biltreyst, Maltby and Meers (eds.) *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity*, p.5.

<sup>84</sup> Biltreyst, Maltby and Meers (eds.) *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity*, p.7.

They argue that cinema was a ‘complicated arena in which modern, anti-modern and alternative forms of modernity met’ and that cinema entrepreneurs had an important negotiating role, acting as intermediaries and ‘cultural brokers’. A number of contributors to Biltereyst et al tell remarkably similar stories of cinema’s contribution to ‘provincial modernity’ leading the editors to suggest that it would be ‘fruitful to look at the extent to which small town communities in Europe and the United States shared similar experiences of cinema, distinct in character and social function from those of urban audiences’.<sup>85</sup>

Indeed, collectively the ‘new cinema history’ makes a clear and strong argument for more local studies to better understand the complex environment in which cinema operated, although there is also a call for this ‘foundation of micro-historical enquiry’ to be scaled up analytically to create a larger and more complex understanding of the ‘infrastructure of cultural life’.<sup>86</sup> Maltby writes that ‘close historical investigations of the everyday nature of local cinema going reveal how the resilient parochialism of individuals and communities incorporated and accommodated the passing content that occupied their screens to their local concerns and community experiences’.<sup>87</sup> In spite of this encouragement to focus locally, with very few exceptions, the local and regional studies undertaken as part of the ‘new cinema history’ have been located in the United States or continental Europe not the United Kingdom.

### **The Welsh context**

Until fairly recently, Welsh historiography has paid cinema, and leisure more generally, relatively scant attention. So domineering, indeed emblematic, has been the presence of the coal industry in the south Wales valleys - and the politics that it gave rise to - that the focus has been predominantly on the economic and political. In Chapter One of his book *Capitalism, Community and Conflict: The south Wales coalfield 1898-1947*,<sup>88</sup> Chris Williams reviews historical perspectives on the region

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<sup>85</sup> Biltereyst, Maltby and Meers (eds.) *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity*, p.13.

<sup>86</sup> Maltby, Biltereyst and Meers (eds.), *Explorations in New Cinema History*, p.13.

<sup>87</sup> Maltby, Biltereyst and Meers (eds.), *Explorations in New Cinema History*, p.14.

<sup>88</sup> Chris Williams, *Capitalism, Community and Conflict: The south Wales coalfield 1898-1947* (Cardiff, 1998).

and concurs with Deian Hopkins' judgment of a decade earlier that in modern Welsh history 'there are far too many empty shelves, where studies of demography, migration, standards of living, patterns of consumption, health, welfare and education should sit'.<sup>89</sup> It is telling that in the useful *Further Reading* section of his book, Williams lists 56 sources on economic and trade union history, 48 on politics and ideology and just 16 on popular culture and religion. At the heart of much of this history are the miners and their trade union, the South Wales Miners' Federation. Whilst an understanding of economic and political change should underpin any history of the south Wales valleys, these histories have sometimes been tinged with a post hoc idealism. Francis's and Smith's history of the South Wales Miners' Federation, for example, characterizes coalfield society as an 'alternative culture', hostile to capitalism and 'founded on class discipline, resourceful quasi-political illegality, direct action resulting often in guerilla and open warfare, collectivist action of various forms, perverse humour and escapism'.<sup>90</sup> Whilst an overly simplistic picture of a noble proletariat occupying a 'society within a society' has generally been rejected, much Welsh historiography remains preoccupied by capital-labour relations and radical politics.

The neglect of other important aspects of life, such as personal relationships, leisure pursuits and religion, leads to a flat one-dimensional picture of the south Wales valleys. Indeed, a number of commentators have argued that within the context of daily life, politics came quite far down the list of priorities for most south Wales people. For example, Russell Davies has written in relation to the people of Carmarthenshire that 'the problems that pre-occupied them were not political and public but private and personal'.<sup>91</sup> By the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a flourishing popular culture in the south Wales valleys and yet, as Gareth Williams has written, the 'work of excavating the popular culture of industrial Wales, unraveling its subtleties and deconstructing its shared and specific meanings, is only just beginning'.<sup>92</sup> Penned in 1998, the assertion remains valid today, although Williams has made an important contribution in relation to one of Wales' most

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<sup>89</sup> Deian Hopkins, 'Reflections of an editor 1972-87', *Llafur* 4,4 (1987), p. 7

<sup>90</sup> Hywel Francis and Dai Smith, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (Cardiff, 1998).

<sup>91</sup> Davies, *Secret sins*, p. 236.

<sup>92</sup> Gareth Williams, "'How's the tenors in Dowlais?': Hegemony, harmony and popular culture in England and Wales, 1600-1900', *Llafur* 5.1 (1998).

emblematic social activities, choral singing. In his book *Valleys of song: music and society in Wales, 1840-1914* he uses the Taff, Aberdare and Rhondda valleys as case studies to illustrate the significant place that collective music, in particular choral music, played in the lives of many Welsh people.<sup>93</sup> Although choral societies were often created from chapel choirs they were far from being earnest, God-fearing occupations. Rather, they were ‘festive and enjoyable, a shared experience providing companionship and group identity in new and often uncongenial surroundings’. In his most recent book *Do you hear the people sing?: The Male Voice Choirs of Wales* he traces the chronology, geography and social origins of Wales male voice choirs since the mid 1800s which he argues chart the contours of modern Welsh history more generally.<sup>94</sup>

Whilst relatively little has been written on leisure in Wales, the literature on cinema and theatre is even sparser. Cecil Price has written about professional theatre in Wales from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century, including the role played by portable theatres up to 1914.<sup>95</sup> Theatre was one of the first homes for early film exhibition and there were many overlaps between the genres, and so Price’s work is relevant to cinema’s gestation and early years in Wales. Meanwhile, the focus of Welsh cinema history has tended to be on Wales’ contribution to film-making and how Wales is portrayed in film. For example, Berry’s *Wales and Cinema: The first hundred years*, published in 1994, includes some useful material on the early years of the cinema industry in Wales but the main emphasis of the book is on the Welsh impact on film-making, including the contribution of individual directors.<sup>96</sup> Another theme that has received scholarly attention is the role played by working men’s institute cinemas.<sup>97</sup> Although formally non-profit making and superficially part of

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<sup>93</sup> Gareth Williams, *Valleys of Song: Music and society in Wales, 1840-1914* (Cardiff, 1998).

<sup>94</sup> Gareth Williams, *Do you hear the people sing?: The Male Voice Choirs of Wales* (Llandysul, 2015).

<sup>95</sup> Cecil Price, *The Professional Theatre in Wales* (Swansea, 1984); Cecil Price, *The English Theatre in Wales in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Cardiff, 1948); Cecil Price, ‘Portable Theatres in Wales 1843-1914’, *National History of Wales Journal*, 1X, No 1 (1955-6), pp. 65-92.

<sup>96</sup> David Berry *Wales and Cinema: The first hundred years* (Cardiff, 1994).

<sup>97</sup> Stephen Ridgwell, ‘South Wales and the cinema in the 1930s’, *Welsh History Review*, 17:4 (December, 1995), pp. 590-615; Robert James, ‘“A Very Profitable Enterprise”: South Wales Miners’ Institute Cinemas in the 1930’s’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 27:1 (2007), pp. 27-61; Bert Hogenkamp, ‘Miners’ cinemas in south Wales in the 1920s and 1930s’, *Llafur*, 4:2, (1985), pp. 64-76; Stefan Moitra, ‘“The management committee intend to act as ushers”: cinema operation and the south Wales Miners’ Institutes in the 1950s and 1960s’ in Biltreyst, Maltby and Meers (eds.) *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity*.

what has been called ‘other cinema’ (ie non-theatrical exhibition),<sup>98</sup> research has shown that most working men’s institute cinemas were run on a commercial basis and to coin James’ words could be a ‘very profitable enterprise’.<sup>99</sup> In contrast, there has been very little investigation of the commercial cinema and entrepreneur. Miskell argues that the concentration on film production rather than exhibition has meant that the relationships that small scale exhibitors had with their audiences and local communities have been overlooked, and that these relationships had particular significance in Wales because of the predominance of this form of ownership. However, as discussed in the introduction, although Miskell’s book is undoubtedly an important contribution to understanding of how cinema entertainment was provided and consumed in Wales between 1918 and 1951, its Wales-wide perspective means that it is unable to capture the dynamics of local relationships in any detail.<sup>100</sup>

Whilst very little has been written focusing specifically on the local impact of cinema in Wales, there is a developing field of research that provides an important context. This centres on the role played by a newly formed ‘urban elite’ that by the beginning of the twentieth century had come to dominate civic life in the south Wales valleys. This civic elite not only arbitrated a town’s best interests, but was also at the heart of a new regulatory framework aimed at supervising film exhibition. For cinema entrepreneurs, securing local support did not depend simply on running an orderly and respectable house: there was also an expectation that, in their attitudes and actions, they would personify the publicly spirited, socially responsible ethos promulgated by a new generation of civic leaders.

There is certainly nothing unusual about the middle classes having such a pivotal role in shaping towns and cities. As Croll has noted, many scholars have described the ‘multi-various schemes to civilise the nineteenth century British town and city’.<sup>101</sup> However, only fairly recently has scholarly attention turned to the public role played by the middle class in Wales and an important, albeit tentative, conclusion is that the ‘civic project’ in the south Wales valleys was rather different to that

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<sup>98</sup> Approximately a third of the chapters included in Maltby, Stokes and Allen (eds.) *Going to the Movies* are dedicated to forms of ‘other cinema’.

<sup>99</sup> Robert James, “‘A Very Profitable Enterprise’: South Wales Miners’ Institute Cinemas in the 1930’s,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 27:1 (2007), pp. 27-61;

<sup>100</sup> Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*.

<sup>101</sup> Croll, *Civilising the Urban*, p. 3



prevailing in many other areas of the UK. Importantly, it was *not* defined predominantly by class but by a unifying commitment to improve local conditions - physically, socially and spiritually.<sup>102</sup> The overwhelming dominance of the coal and iron industries meant that the upper middle classes - the major industrialists, manufacturers and merchants that the industrial revolution spawned in most major cities and towns, were sparsely represented in the south Wales valleys. Although the middle class is notoriously difficult to define and even harder to enumerate,<sup>103</sup> it is clear that in the south Wales valleys it was the lower middle classes (such as tradespeople, dealers and contractors) that predominated although, as towns grew in size and prosperity, they were joined by increasing numbers of professionals (such as architects, doctors and solicitors) and members of what was described at the time as the 'commercial class', people such as auctioneers, estate agents and accountants. Light has drawn attention to the inclusion of 'relatively humble middle-class occupational groups' in the 'urban elites' of Pontypool and Bridgend.<sup>104</sup> Neil Evans describes this type of valleys town as urban rather than civic because of its 'relative absence of an independent middle class'.<sup>105</sup> He argues that Cardiff, in contrast, and in spite of the dominance of the Bute estate which controlled the docks and much land in the city, was indisputably civic having acquired its municipal incorporation in the middle ages and having an energetic upper middle class comprising merchants, bankers and shippers (although many of Cardiff's middle class were diverse in their origins, many hailing from south west England and other areas of south Wales).

There was also a relatively high level of social mobility in valleys communities. The rapid expansion of valleys towns generated many business opportunities in professional, commercial and retail sectors and it was not uncommon for small-scale enterprises to flourish and expand, propelling their owners up the socio-economic ladder further elasticating class divisions. The geography and

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<sup>102</sup> For example, Croll, *Civilising the Urban*; Julie Light, 'The Middle Classes as Urban Elites in Nineteenth Century Wales', *Welsh History Review*, 24:3 (June 2009); Joe England, 'Unitarians, Freemasons, Chartists: The Middle Class in Victorian Merthyr', *Welsh History Review*, 23:4 (Month, 2007); Chris Evans, *The Labyrinth of Flames*; *Work and Social Conflict in Early Industrial Merthyr Tydfil* (Cardiff, 2000).

<sup>103</sup> Julie Light, 'The Middle Classes as Urban Elites in Nineteenth Century Wales', *Welsh History Review*, 24:3 (June 2009), pp. 34-43.

<sup>104</sup> Julie Light, "'...mere seekers of fame?': personalities, power and politics in the small town: Pontypool and Bridgend, c. 1860-95", *Urban History*, 32:01 (May, 2005).

<sup>105</sup> Neil Evans, 'The Welsh Victorian City: The Middle Class and Civic and National Consciousness in Cardiff, 1850-1914', *Welsh History Review*, Vol. 12 (June, 1985).

structure of valleys towns also led to a high degree of inter-class mixing, to what Light has phrased ‘face-to-face’ communities.<sup>106</sup> Although there were premier residential areas, a significant proportion of a town’s communal spaces - the churches and chapels, theatres and shopping streets - were shared by all classes. The limited range of facilities meant that ‘one size had to fit all’, there was, for example, no concert hall versus music hall demarcation that prevailed in larger towns and cities. Furthermore, an overly exclusive approach to the ‘civic project’ would have further constrained the already limited human capital that could be drawn on to drive the improvement of valleys towns. Civic ambition brought together many different groups such as trades people, professionals, religious leaders and politicians, and commercial interests were increasingly identified with those of the town.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that diversity of membership of the ‘urban elite’ was unique to the south Wales valleys. A number of studies of English towns and cities have also found that the urban elite was often not a single unified class but rather a plurality of different groups converging around the civic cause, and it was at least partly because of this diversity that they failed to gain hegemony – or social control - over the working classes. Gunn<sup>107</sup> and Hewitt<sup>108</sup> on Manchester, Morris on Leeds,<sup>109</sup> and Trainor on the black country towns of Bilston, Dudley and West Bromwich,<sup>110</sup> all find that the middle class from which the urban elite was drawn had many gradations and were as often divided by economic position, religion, politics and culture as they were united.<sup>111</sup>

It is, nevertheless, clear that what characterized the south Wales valleys was the relatively flat socio-economic structure, the small size of the middle class both numerically and proportionally, the lack of an aristocratic and wealthy upper middle

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<sup>106</sup> Julie Light, “‘...mere seekers of fame’?: personalities, power and politics in the small town: Pontypool and Bridgend, c. 1860-95”, *Urban History*, 32:01 (May, 2005).

<sup>107</sup> S. Gunn, ‘The “failure” of the Victorian middle class: a critique’, in J. Olf and J. Seed (eds.), *The Culture of Capital: Art, Power and the Nineteenth Century Middle Class* (Manchester, 1988).

<sup>108</sup> M. Hewitt, *The Emergence of Stability in the Industrial City, Manchester 1832-67* (Aldershot, 1996).

<sup>109</sup> R. J. Morris, *Class, Sect and Party: The Making of the British Middle Class, Leeds 1820-1850* (Manchester, 1990).

<sup>110</sup> R. H. Trainor, *Black Country Elites: The Exercise of Authority in an Industrialised Area* (Oxford, 1993).

<sup>111</sup> See John Smith, ‘Urban elites c.1830-1930 and urban history’, *Urban History*, 27:2 (Month, 2000) for a comprehensive review of the ways in which the role of urban elites have been examined and interpreted over the years.

class and the permeability of the divide between the lower middle classes and 'respectable' working classes. Hewitt attributes the variety in 'urban morphology' that existed between cities/towns to a range of variables including geography, industrialisation, social structure, land/property ownership, religion, politics and local governance arrangements. This 'multiplicity of factors, acting either independently or in combination, exerted significant influence on the ways in which elites influenced local societies'.<sup>112</sup> The coalescing force that bound the 'urban elite' in the south Wales valleys was a shared vision of the 'ideal' town – not only the infrastructure and services that were required to establish a town's civic credentials, but also the attitudes and behavior of its residents. Croll argues that new forms of commercialised leisure made a number of significant 'demands upon the urban landscape'.<sup>113</sup> For this reason his study of the 'civic project' in Merthyr focuses on a number of popular cultural practices (such as popular music, sport and street etiquette) and the impact they had on the perception and 'management' of public space.

This study's location at the juncture of several very different historiographies brings benefits that go beyond the sum of the individual historiographical contributions. It is in these border lands between historiographical fields that fresh perspectives and novel methodological approaches are most likely to flourish. The theoretical richness of leisure historiography provides several important themes – for example, change versus continuity and the extent to which leisure shaped self and collective identities – which have acted as analytical lenses for the scrutiny of evidence. The 'new cinema history', on the other hand, has provided a strong rationale for a local study and for combining a variety of different types of evidence, including quantitative sources which cultural historians have all too frequently shied away from. Welsh historiography has not only provided context, but also a means of connecting cinema as a cultural institution to its local socio-economic and cultural setting.

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<sup>112</sup> M. Hewitt, *The Emergence of Stability in the Industrial City, Manchester 1832-67* (Aldershot, 1996).

<sup>113</sup> Croll, *Civilising the Urban*, p.41.

## Chapter Two

### The importance of place

Whilst this thesis sets out to engage with the important historiographical themes outlined in the preceding chapter, it is very much rooted in place and concerned with people. Indeed, the thesis' leading characters are the town of Bargoed in the Rhymney Valley and the cinema entrepreneurs, the Withers brothers. This chapter provides locational context by describing the socio-economic circumstances surrounding cinema's incursion into the south Wales valleys and providing pen-portraits of Bargoed and the Withers brothers.

#### Cinema's early incursion into the valleys

It is important to describe the broad socio-economic trends that combined to create such a fertile investment environment for cinema exhibition in the south Wales valleys during the early years of the twentieth century. At the same time that cinema was transitioning from a side-show gimmick to a mainstream entertainment, the valleys were at the height of their economic prosperity. In the twenty years to 1921, the population of Glamorganshire increased by 46% and the population of the Rhondda valley by 69%.<sup>1</sup> Employment and wage rates were high and workers had achieved reduced working hours meaning they had more time for recreation. By the early 1900s the average working day had been reduced to nine hours and by 1920 it was generally eight hours.<sup>2</sup> In the wages-leisure time trade-off, it has been argued that during the boom years of the early 1900s, south Wales miners were generally willing to take out some of their higher wages in the form of increased leisure time.<sup>3</sup> It should also be remembered that many workers were young single men who had

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<sup>1</sup> John Williams, *Digest of Welsh Historical Statistics, Volume 1* (Cardiff, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Department of Employment and Productivity, *British Labour Statistics: Historical Abstract 1886-1968*, p.160, quoted in H. Cunningham, 'Leisure and Culture' in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.) *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950, Volume 2, People and their Environment* (Cambridge, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> W. J. Hausmann and B. T. Hirsh, 'Wages, Leisure and Productivity in South Wales Coal Mining 1874-1914: An Economic Approach,' *Llafur*, 3 (1982), pp.58-66.

moved to the valleys from rural areas not just for work but also for a more metropolitan lifestyle. There was, undoubtedly, a large potential market for cinema in the valleys and investment there would be a natural extension of the entrepreneurial activity that was already established in Cardiff and Swansea which were ‘as advanced as any other town outside the major centres of London, Paris and New York’ in relation to the commercial exhibition of film.<sup>4</sup>

Entrepreneurs were attracted by the high returns that many cinema companies were making. Prospectuses for new cinema companies and the financial press frequently quoted companies paying dividends of around 20% and sometimes as high as 30%, a clear sign of the embryonic industry’s potential profitability. Films were relatively cheap to rent enabling cinema proprietors to make regular programme changes during the week thus maximizing audiences and profits. As one prospectus stated ‘there are no expensive artistes to engage as is the case of theatres and music halls, and the working expenses are comparatively light, only a small permanent staff being required at each theatre’.<sup>5</sup> The Kinematograph Exhibitors’ Association (KEA) Year Book for 1914 reported that the financial press which had previously scoffed at the kinematograph industry as a ‘passing craze’ and bewailed the credulity of persons who invested their money in it, had more recently shifted its attitude and now viewed the picture theatre as a ‘well established institution’ and ‘that there was no reason why it should not become the basis of a very satisfactory investment’.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to bear in mind that England and Wales had one of the most supportive frameworks for business formation in Europe making it relatively easy for entrepreneurs to capitalize on the increased prosperity of the valleys and the growing appetite for cinema. In particular, the reform of the laws relating to limited liability in the mid nineteenth century was a major impetus to company formation.<sup>7</sup> The Partnership and Limited Liability Acts (1855) and the Joint Stock Companies Act

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Stead, ‘Wales and Film’, in Trevor Herbert and Gareth Elwyn Jones (eds.), *Wales Between the Wars* (Cardiff, 1995), pp. 161-185.

<sup>5</sup> Associated Electric Theatres (BT31/19440/109321 and BT34/3561/109321), Board of Trade papers, the National Archives.

<sup>6</sup> Kinematograph Exhibitors’ Association Year Book, 1915

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, H.A. Shannon, ‘The Coming of General Limited Liability’, *Economic History*, 2 (1930-31), pp.267-291 and Donna Loftus, ‘Limited Liability, Market Democracy and the Social Organisation of Production in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Britain’, in Nancy Henry and Cannon Schmitt (eds.) *New Perspectives on Finance and Culture* (Bloomington, 2009)

(1856) meant that any group of seven or more persons wishing to pool their capital could do so simply by signing a memorandum of association. The 1856 Act meant that individuals were no longer liable for debts incurred by a company beyond the value of the shares owned and also removed the £10 minimum price of shares. Previously businesses had either been large public companies formed by royal charter or a special Act of Parliament, small enterprises of two or more proprietors that were, by default, common law partnerships or were sole proprietorships. Ron Harris has argued that these changes to the statutory framework led to two major trends. The first, which has received most scholarly attention because of its macro-economic impacts, was the ‘huge increase in corporate stock, the emergence of big business, often monopolistic, and of the corporate economy’. The second trend, which has been largely overlooked, was the appearance of smaller companies with fewer shareholders, less capital and no intention of raising capital on the stock exchange.<sup>8</sup> These were by most definitions ‘private companies’ that had sought incorporation in order to benefit from the safety net of limited liability. In sharp contrast if companies were not incorporated partners remained liable to the last shilling of their debt and assets. Service sector companies accounted for a significant proportion of this new wave of company formation based on the ‘expansion of the middle class, literacy, leisure and new consumer technologies’. For example, in terms of sector of activity, 12% of companies registered in 1892 were entertainment related, the second largest category after manufacturing (26%).<sup>9</sup> Entertainment businesses were even more strongly represented amongst newly formed companies. Indeed, a number of commentators have argued that by moving into the service sector, British entrepreneurs ‘provided what little buoyancy there was in Britain’s aggregate economic growth’ in the period immediately preceding World War One when many traditional industries had lost their momentum.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ron Harris, ‘The private origins of the private company: Britain 1862-1907,’ *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 33:2 (2013), p. 339.

<sup>9</sup> Harris, ‘The private origins of the private company’, p. 355

<sup>10</sup> For example, P. L. Payne, *British Entrepreneurship in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke and London, 1988).

## Introducing the Withers brothers



Figure 1 The Withers brothers, Albert on the right and Alfred on the left. (Source: papers in possession of author).

On the face of it, the Withers brothers, Albert Jackson-Withers and Alfred Withers (shown in Figure 1), were unlikely theatre and cinema proprietors. Whilst most of their theatre-owning counterparts had been born and brought up in the often precarious trade, the Withers brothers came from a comfortably off, middle class London family. Although there was a considerable family enthusiasm for amateur dramatics, there appears to have been no familial precedent of professional involvement. In 1906, the brothers (with the support of other family members) set up a company to establish a number of provincial theatres. Alfred, a solicitor practicing in High Holburn, was the ‘back-room business man’ of the operation, whilst Albert, a loud and irrepressible character, was responsible for ‘front of house’ management.

In the early 1900s, Albert moved to Merthyr Tydfil to oversee the management of the Theatre Royal, and in 1908 the brothers acquired the New Hall Theatre, Bargoed (Figure 2 below). The New Hall was the town’s first theatre and its opening generated considerable local excitement and pride.



Figure 2 New Hall Theatre, Bargoed (on the far right hand side of the street)  
(Source: postcard courtesy of Roy Smith, Gelligaer Historical Society)

Relatively quickly Bargoed became the base for the brothers' business. In 1910, Albert and his family moved to the town, although he retained an interest in the Theatre Royal Merthyr until 1915. The rapid expansion of the town that was occurring at this time, and the commercial opportunities this spawned, is likely to have been a major draw. In c1917 the Withers acquired the Palace cinema that had been opened in 1909 directly opposite the New Hall, and in c1919 they took over the Hanbury cinema on Trafalgar Square, thereby establishing a monopoly of cinema/theatre provision in Bargoed. The New Hall theatre was undoubtedly the jewel in the crown for Albert Jackson-Withers, whose passion had always been theatre. In 1908 he had married the actress Marie Cecelia Wall and in the early years of their marriage was an active promoter of her career. However, the business had to adapt to meet changing tastes and preferences, and over the years a 'dining place of distinction', ballroom and cinema were added to the New Hall's suite of amenities.

In the early 1920s, Alfred Withers moved to Bargoed from London with his wife and two children following a spell of ill health. His move coincided with a period of extreme economic hardship and business churn in the south Wales valleys. Many cinemas went out of business and Alfred's well-honed commercial and legal skills, and an alliance with the financier Julian Hodge (who later went on to establish the Bank of Wales), led to a major expansion of their business. Following a series of take-overs, cinema soon became the mainstay of their business and by the boom years



of the 1950s the company had become the largest cinema business in south Wales with a portfolio of around fifty cinemas. As the business grew, the brothers became more closely involved with Julian Hodge, both personally and professionally, and by the time of the brothers' deaths in the 1960s, Hodge had the controlling interest in the business (although with the decline in the popularity of cinema it was somewhat diminished). Nevertheless, Hodge (by this time Sir Julian Hodge) sold the business to Rank in the early 1970s for c£2m and most of the remaining cinemas were subsequently converted to bingo halls or demolished for redevelopment.<sup>11</sup> The Withers brothers' involvement with cinema in south Wales had spanned some sixty years, from cinema's first tentative appearance in the early 1900s to its eventual demise in the 1960s.

### **Bargoed – the 'metropolis of the Rhymney Valley'**

Before the sinking of Bargoed colliery at the turn of the twentieth century, Bargoed had been a relatively small settlement hugging the banks of the Rhymney river with a population of just a few hundred people. By 1905, the population of Bargoed and neighbouring Gilfach had increased to over 10,000 and the two villages had merged into a bustling, vibrant town. Gelligaer district as a whole experienced a population boom during the early years of the twentieth century. In the ten years between 1901 and 1911 the district's population more than doubled from 17, 242 to 35,521 (compared with a 25% increase in population across Glamorganshire).<sup>12</sup> Figure 3 vividly illustrates the impact of this population growth on physical infrastructure.

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<sup>11</sup> Timothy O'Sullivan, *Julian Hodge: A Biography* (London, Boston and Henley, 1981), p. 64.

<sup>12</sup> Census 1901, Census 1911, County Reports for Glamorganshire, H.M.S.O., London

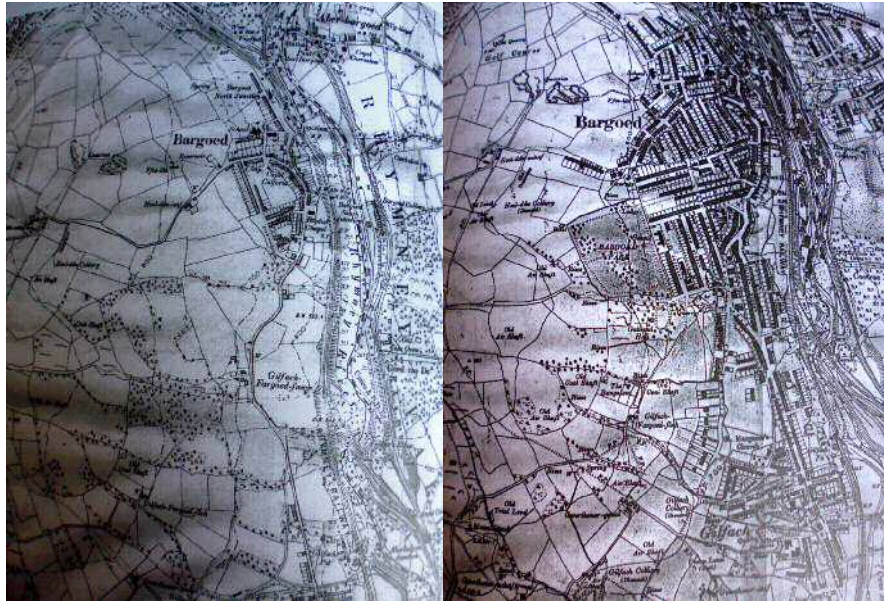


Figure 3 OS maps of Bargoed and Gilfach, c1900 on the left, and the equivalent for c1920 on the right.

(Source: *Bargoed and Gilfach: A Local History*<sup>13</sup>)

The Town Directory, published shortly before the First World War described the ‘wonderful metamorphosis’.

*From a quiet, rural, obscure village, Bargoed has sprung – as if by the movement of the magic wand – into an up-to-date, enterprising, progressive Town, whose doings often evoke the envy and admiration of less ‘go-a-head’ towns, not only in the Principality but beyond the border.*<sup>14</sup>

The principal power-house of change, the coal industry, was at the height of its productivity and profitability. In December 1908, Bargoed colliery, owned by the Powell Duffryn Steam Coal Company Ltd, broke the world record for production when a ten-hour shift produced 3,562 tons of coal. The colliery was the most important employer in the area, employing some 2,700 men in 1915.<sup>15</sup> In 1921, 60% of all ‘occupied persons aged 12 years and over’ in the Gelligaer district were employed in mining and quarrying operations.<sup>16</sup> The growth in disposable incomes together with the more systematic organisation of labour triggered a host of social, political and cultural transformations. The early 1900s saw a cascade of municipal developments including a police station in 1904, a police court in 1908, a fire station

<sup>13</sup> Gelligaer Historical Society, *Bargoed and Gilfach: A local history* (Pontypool, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Kelly’s Directory of Monmouthshire and south Wales (London, 1920).

<sup>15</sup> Gelligaer Historical Society, *Bargoed and Gilfach: A local history* (Pontypool, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Census 1921, County Reports for Glamorganshire, H.M.S.O., London.

in 1909, a labour exchange in 1911 and a working-men's institute in 1913. Commerce also flourished. The first bank, the London and Provincial, opened in 1904 and by World War One there were eight hotels/public houses in the town, two cinemas, one theatre, a ballroom, a skating rink, a department store and several cafes. Kelly's Trading Directory for 1920 lists almost eighty different trades, professions and services in operation in the town, from false teeth maker to fried fish dealer, from pawn-broker to picture frame maker.<sup>17</sup> The town had been served by the Rhymney Valley railway line since the mid 1850s and improvements to Bargoed station carried out in 1906-7 helped to cement Bargoed's place as the commercial and business hub of the Rhymney Valley. Over the Christmas period 1921, over 10,000 people (roughly a quarter of the population of Gelligaer district) visited the town by train.<sup>18</sup>

The rapid expansion of Bargoed overlapped with the religious revival of 1904-1905 and was marked by a flurry of chapel building. Over a period of less than ten years around eight chapels of various Nonconformist denominations were opened in the town, although in some cases these chapels replaced smaller buildings that expanding congregations had outgrown. For example, the Baptist chapel in Hanbury Street, which opened in 1906 and accommodated some 1,000 people, replaced a number of makeshift arrangements including using the assembly room at the Plasnewydd Hotel when the church was officially constituted in 1896. Whilst the inhabitants of Bargoed might not have exhibited the extreme religious fervour of some other valleys towns (at Mountain Ash there was strong pressure to abolish the annual Eisteddfod because it wasn't deemed sufficiently religious and the town of Dowlais was held in the spell of a band of American 'Pentecostal dancers' for several months) the revival undoubtedly swelled the ranks of chapel congregations and led to stricter religious observance. The local newspaper, which included a regular temperance column during this period, wrote that 'judging from the immense amount of spiritual enthusiasm and fervor evinced at the mission meetings at the Wesleyan chapel, it may truly be said that a religious revival has commenced in the town'.<sup>19</sup> The paper described how so great was the rush that people climbed through windows to

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<sup>17</sup> Kelly's Directory of Monmouthshire and south Wales (London, 1920).

<sup>18</sup> Gelligaer Historical Society, *Bargoed and Gilfach: A local history* (Pontypool, 2011) and Census 1921, County Reports for Glamorganshire, H.M.S.O, London.

<sup>19</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 28<sup>th</sup> November 1904.

gain access to chapels and how meetings sometimes continued throughout the night.<sup>20</sup> During this period there were frequent calls for the building of a public hall in the town since in its absence ‘a great deal of public service has to be transacted on licensed premises’.<sup>21</sup> Many also called for more opportunities for ‘rational and healthy recreation’ to curb drunkenness. An editorial in the local newspaper berated the nightly scenes outside public houses where ‘some of Bargoed’s men make themselves into thirsty beasts, and the women are a disgrace to their sex’.<sup>22</sup>

The extraordinary pace of development led to municipal promotion for the town when Gelligaer and Rhigos Rural District Council was replaced by Gelligaer Urban District Council (UDC) in 1908. The elevation in status was warmly welcomed as the pace of change required a ‘wider municipal approach’ not the ‘cramped attitudes’ that had previously prevailed.<sup>23</sup> Gelligaer UDC was part of East Glamorgan constituency, one of five single member constituencies in the county of Glamorganshire. In 1918 the local authority became part of Caerphilly constituency, one of seven single member constituencies in Glamorganshire. During its early years, Liberal and Independent representatives, including a number of Nonconformist ministers, controlled the council but, in common with other south Wales valleys authorities, Labour members came to dominate post First World War.<sup>24</sup>

Within the space of just twenty years Bargoed had become a bustling commercial centre and the town’s growing battalion of business people had a pivotal role in powering the ‘civic project’. Although Bargoed had much further to travel than more established valleys towns, such as Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare, the towns shared a similar civic vision. One of the key requirements, regardless of class, was loyalty to one’s town. Shoppers were regularly exhorted to do their spending locally as the advertisement below (Figure 4) vividly illustrates.

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<sup>20</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 7<sup>th</sup> January 1905.

<sup>21</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 10<sup>th</sup> September 1904.

<sup>22</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 28<sup>th</sup> November 1904.

<sup>23</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 7<sup>th</sup> July and 18<sup>th</sup> August 1904.

<sup>24</sup> Gelligaer Historical Society, *Bargoed and Gilfach: A local history* (Pontypool, 2011) and Census 1921, County Reports for Glamorganshire, H.M.S.O, London, pp.69-80.

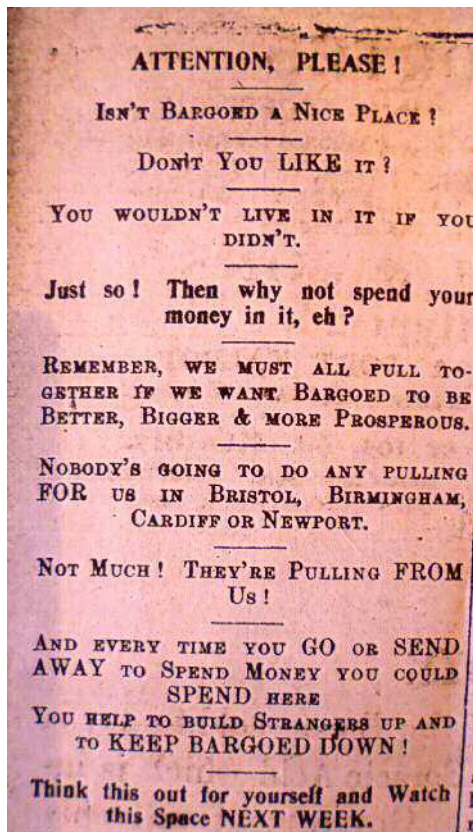


Figure 4 Isn't Bargoed a nice place?  
(Source: *Bargoed Journal*, 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1908)

There was also an expectation that if businessmen derived their livelihood from a town they should live within its environs. Croll points out that in its early days Merthyr Tydfil suffered because it was considered a place to make money and leave.<sup>25</sup> When Albert Jackson-Withers announced to a Bargoed Chamber of Trade meeting that he would be moving to Bargoed to 'get amongst them' the news was greeted with a 'hearty round of applause'.<sup>26</sup> Lack of civilized behavior is often blamed on young people who have little attachment to the town. In an article on '*The Ideal Bargoed*', unmarried men and people who have moved into the town in the last few years were blamed for having 'little sympathy with the better aspirations of Bargoed'.<sup>27</sup>

A side-product of fierce town loyalty was unabashed rivalry with neighbouring towns. Croll describes this effect in relation to Merthyr Tydfil.

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<sup>25</sup> Croll, *Civilising the Urban*, p. 41

<sup>26</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 10<sup>th</sup> December 1908.

<sup>27</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1904.

Inhabitants of the ‘old metropolis’ were unable to conceal their resentment at the pace of civic progress in other towns, in particular ‘diminutive’ Aberdare where locals could boast of a town hall, library and two public parks.<sup>28</sup> Rivalry between the various towns of Merthyr borough also threatened to derail attempts to consolidate a larger identity for Merthyr.<sup>29</sup> The civic project in Bargoed was similarly underpinned by a need to be bigger and better than other local towns - the widely publicised ambition was to be the ‘metropolis of the Rhymney Valley’. When Ystrad Mynach underwent expansion in 1912, the *Bargoed Journal* warned that the local Chamber of Trade needed to wake up; ‘there is no question that the people of Bargoed, apart from a small few, have been lacking in private enterprise such is found in every successful commercial centre’.<sup>30</sup> A strong concept of place was essential to the civic project – in Light’s words, ‘civic leaders drew their identity from the town and helped to formulate the identity of the town itself’.<sup>31</sup>

However, developing a strong sense of community, of shared values and vision, in conditions of such flux, in a town of strangers, must have been a major challenge for the civic project. In 1911, over two-fifths (42%) of people living in Glamorganshire had been born outside the county (11% in Wales, 28% in England, 1% in another UK location, and 2% outside the UK).<sup>32</sup> Young men who had moved to the area in search of work had a strong presence. For example, whilst females outnumbered males across the whole of England and Wales in 1921 (1,095 to 1,000), in Glamorganshire the ratio was 964 females for every 1,000 males.<sup>33</sup> There had been similarly striking changes to the age structure of many south Wales valleys communities. In 1911, almost a third (29%) of the population of Gelligaer district was aged between 15 and 30 years of age and only 2% were aged 65 years or more.<sup>34</sup> The influx of immigrants had a major impact on the prevalence of Welsh speaking. In 1901, over a half (56%) of those aged 3+ living in Gelligaer district spoke Welsh

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<sup>28</sup> Croll, *Civilising the Urban*, p. 39

<sup>29</sup> Croll, *Civilising the Urban*, p. 53

<sup>30</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 1<sup>st</sup> August 1912

<sup>31</sup> Julie Light, ‘The Middle Classes as Urban Elites in Nineteenth Century Wales’, *Welsh History Review*, 24:3 (June 2009), p.47.

<sup>32</sup> Census 1911, County Reports for Glamorganshire, H.M.S.O., London

<sup>33</sup> Census 1921, County Reports for Glamorganshire, H.M.S.O., London

<sup>34</sup> Census 1911, County Report for Glamorganshire, H.M.S.O., London

(monoglot and bilingual) but by 1921 this proportion had decreased to a third (30%).<sup>35</sup>

The inflow of workers also had major implications for local infrastructure, such as housing, transport, sanitation and lighting. During the early years of the twentieth century, basic amenities were lacking and the ‘metropolis of the Rhymney valley’ existed more in aspiration than reality. Figure 5 shows Hanbury Road, one of Bargoed’s main thoroughfares, with the town’s first bank in view whilst the mud covered street hints at the infrastructure deficit. House conditions were similarly deleterious. A survey of 598 houses conducted by the council in 1911 found that less than a half (45%) of families had sole occupation of their own home, almost two-fifths (38%) had lodgers and another fifth (16%) shared with one or more other families. The average number of occupants per house was 6.4 and in some cases conditions were described as ‘squalid and wretched’.<sup>36</sup>



Figure 5 Hanbury Road, Bargoed, c1905.  
(Source: *Bargoed and Gilfach: A Local History*<sup>37</sup>)

Notwithstanding the difficulties, the civic cause would have been a compelling one, especially for Bargoed’s middle class, since the aims for the town would have matched their own. Nearly all owned businesses, they sold goods and services locally, and so their prosperity depended on the prosperity of the town. Many had fingers in

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<sup>35</sup> Census 1901, Census 1921, County Reports for Glamorganshire, H.M.S.O., London

<sup>36</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UD/G/C/1/4.

<sup>37</sup> Gelligaer Historical Society, *Bargoed and Gilfach: A local history* (Pontypool, 2011).

several business pies. For example, professionals and trades people were often directors of local companies (including cinema companies) as well as being residential and commercial landlords. It is interesting to note that one of the most popular toasts at civic events was to ‘town and trade’.

Although the period was characterized by considerable civic and commercial confidence, there was also nervousness, even fear, in more traditional circles that the ‘new order’ might undermine the well-established principles and practices of Liberalism and Nonconformism. This fluctuating, occasionally tense, environment meant that it was important for new businesses, including cinemas, to align their interests as closely as possible with those of a newly emerged civic elite and the wider community.

Bargoed’s expansionist ambitions were relatively short-lived. Barely twenty years after its ascension to urban status, Bargoed, like most other valleys towns, was brought low by the economic depression of the 1920s and 1930s. By 1930, the number of men working at Bargoed colliery had fallen by 60% to just over 1,000 and over 9,000 people were registered as unemployed at Bargoed Labour Exchange. Between 1921 (when the local population was at its peak) to 1951 the population of the Gellgaer district declined by a fifth (20%), compared with 2% across Glamorganshire as a whole.<sup>38</sup> In spite of this blow to the town’s economic base, community life remained active during the inter-war years. Churches, chapels, the working men’s institute and a range of other voluntary organisations were busier than ever hosting various events aimed at raising money for distress causes. Commercial entertainments also continued unabated although profit margins were slight. A number of efforts were made to boost trade. For example, in 1936 the Chamber of Trade, which had been disbanded for many years, reconvened and set up Bargoed’s first Shopping Week to encourage more people to visit the town. The local MP Morgan Jones (who had been a Bargoed councillor for eleven years) opened proceedings by saying that Bargoed had ‘fallen on days of austerity’ and that the people of the Rhymney Valley needed to ‘get rid of that snobbish thought that by

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<sup>38</sup> Census 1921, Census 1951, County Reports for Glamorganshire, H.M.S.O., London



going to Cardiff you get better things for your money.’ He expressed the hope that ‘this shopping week will be a turning point in the industrial history of the town’.<sup>39</sup>

The town’s fortunes did improve over the next few decades although the closure of Bargoed colliery in 1977 dealt a blow that was to have an enduring impact. Elwyn Andrews, who was miners’ union secretary in the 1970s, describes the sweeping changes:-

*When I came back to Bargoed after the War [World War Two], life was almost the same. There was no TV or bingo and no one had a car. We used the Workmen’s Institute in Bargoed to meet and talk. We had discussions and choirs and rugby teams, and I remember the library in Bargoed Workmen’s Institute. There was always a lot of people: if they didn’t read, they played cards or talked to their friends but since the number of miners at Bargoed Colliery has decreased and people now have cars and TV there is not so much demand for the library. The windows are broken and the books have been taken away.<sup>40</sup>*

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<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Gelligaer Historical Society, *Bargoed and Gilfach: A local history* (Pontypool, 2011), p.298.

<sup>40</sup> Included in *Gruvarbetare I Wales*, a photographic and narrative collection to mark the closure of Bargoed colliery, and quoted in Gelligaer Historical Society, *Bargoed and Gilfach: A local history* (Pontypool, 2011), p.186.

## Chapter Three

### ***This form of amusement shows no sign of diminishing...<sup>1</sup>: The early days of film exhibition in the south Wales valleys.***

*On the screen, the male and female leads, two Hollywood stars, are in close-up; the dialogue is passionate, romantic. Salvatore, carried away by those faces, by the way they talk, by the beauty of the woman, slowly slips down the length of the curtain until he is sitting on the floor, his eyes glued to the screen.*

Extract from the script of *Cinema Paradiso*

‘Ladies and Gentlemen, if you could see this picture, it would be a train emerging from a tunnel’. Thus members of the audience at one of the first film exhibitions in south Wales were encouraged to apply their imaginations when a technical hitch caused a complete blackout of the pictures.<sup>2</sup> William Haggar’s Windsor Castle Biograph was giving its very first performance at a fairground in Aberavon in April 1898. William Haggar was one of the early pioneers of film exhibition in South Wales and being at the forefront of the genre required determination and practical ingenuity.<sup>3</sup> Early shows were beset with technical problems, including light failure, broken film, missing reels and even the occasional explosion. In addition, the limited availability of film meant it was not possible for exhibitors to make an extended stay anywhere. Most people would only pay once to see a film making cinema what showmen called a ‘oncer’.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of this shaky start, the ten years preceding the First World War saw a massive expansion in film exhibition across most areas of the UK. From a sideshow novelty in the 1890s, film exhibition had developed into the dominant cultural medium by the outbreak of war in 1914. The powerful appeal of cinema in its heyday in the 1920s and 1930s may explain why historians have paid relatively little attention

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<sup>1</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 27<sup>th</sup> June 1907.

<sup>2</sup> As recalled by William Haggar’s son, Walter Haggar, in *Recollections: An account of the early bioscope* (unpublished paper, 1953), referred to by Peter Yorke in *William Haggar, Fairground Film Maker: Biography of a pioneer of the cinema* (Mid Glamorgan, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> William Haggar was also an early film-maker, making hundreds of films including topicals, short comedies, chase films and dramas. Peter Yorke’s book *William Haggar, Fairground Film Maker: Biography of a pioneer of the cinema* (Mid Glamorgan, 2007) provides a detailed account of his life.

<sup>4</sup> Yorke, *William Haggar*, p. 54.

to the formative days of the industry. And yet these early years are crucially important. Cinema did not arrive on the popular entertainment scene fully formed; it was shaped by the attitudes, behaviour and expectations of a variety of interests, including entrepreneurs, audiences, civic authorities and church/chapel, and by the specific blend of economic, social, cultural and technological forces that was in place at the turn of the twentieth century. In spite of its technical novelty, much of the experience of watching early films would have been familiar to audiences. Early film exhibitors were the showmen who, with their travelling shows and theatres, had brought intermittent entertainment to the valleys for many years. Even in the elegant surroundings of a new generation of urban theatres, films drew heavily on earlier forms of popular culture, such as melodrama and farce, and were easily assimilated into the familiar format of the variety programme. As cinema established itself, however, it threw off the clothes it had borrowed from previous entertainment genres and developed its own distinct and enduring style. Film became the torchbearer for a new commoditised leisure industry but, as this chapter argues, the foundations for this mass market were laid in the early days.

### **A process of continuity as well as change**

An analysis of these formative years is an important precursor to what follows in this thesis. It introduces the showmen who exercised a surprising amount of tenacity in the face of a rapidly changing leisure world, and the considerable overlap with earlier entertainment forms was an important reason why early cinema entrepreneurs were able to embed themselves so effectively into the mainstream of local community life.

By 1914 there were at least sixty cinemas in the south Wales Valleys; roughly the same number of theatres were regularly showing films; and a growing number of working men's institutes and public halls were dipping their toes in the waters of commercial film exhibition.<sup>5</sup> The statistics taken alone suggest a cultural tsunami that swept away all earlier forms of popular entertainment. Indeed, the technical novelty

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<sup>5</sup> These figures are taken from Kinematograph Year Books and are likely to significantly underestimate the number of venues showing films. The first year book was published in 1914 and we know from comparisons with other sources, such as local newspapers, that in the early years there was a serious under-reporting of cinemas.

of cinema, and its eventual cultural dominance, has led a number of historians to emphasize the newness of the genre and to give only passing attention to its precursors.<sup>6</sup> In reality there was considerable overlap between film and earlier forms of popular culture. As Raymond Williams has written:

*There was no simple transition from technical prehistory to universal art form...Majority cinema, in both the silent and the sound periods, can be reasonably seen as the flowering of a whole body of drama, theatre, and entertainment, which in its essential interests and methods preceded film but was then at once enhanced and made more widely available by it.*<sup>7</sup>

In many ways, film was able to assimilate itself quickly and easily into the everyday social life of urban Britain because of its *similarity* to earlier entertainment forms, rather than its difference. This process of continuity as well as change can be seen in the south Wales valleys at the end of the nineteenth century when popular commercial entertainment was provided by a colourful collection of travelling theatres, shows, circuses and menageries, in addition to a growing number of permanent theatres established to meet the needs of an increasingly urban population. These shows were cheap - for example for three pence it was possible to see Bostock and Wombwell's No. 1 Royal Menagerie and Gigantic Amalgamations (Figure 6) – and their economic survival was often precarious. The travelling theatres and shows, which for many years had brought intermittent entertainment to rural communities,<sup>8</sup> were given added impetus in the second half of the nineteenth century by the Theatres Act 1843 which excluded booth and tent theatres from the requirement that all stage plays and theatrical buildings should be licensed. This meant that the owners of travelling theatres had considerable freedom to stage whatever entertainment they liked, as long as they secured a license for erecting their temporary 'buildings' and moved on when their license expired (usually when a local fair or race meeting closed). Some of the largest travelling theatres could accommodate a thousand or more spectators and the shows they staged could be as spectacular as anything shown

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<sup>6</sup> This weakness has been identified by a number of commentators including Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks*, p.7.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Williams in an introduction to Vincent Porter and James Curran (eds.), *British Cinema History* (London, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Cecil Price provides a description of the history of these travelling theatres in 'Portable Theatres in Wales 1843-1914', *National Library of Wales Journal*, 9 (1955-6).

by a permanent theatre. In fact, during this period, there was significant overlap between temporary and permanent provision; travelling theatres would often stage their shows in permanent buildings such as taverns or public halls, and a number of proprietors of early permanent theatres took to the road to take advantage of shifting populations.

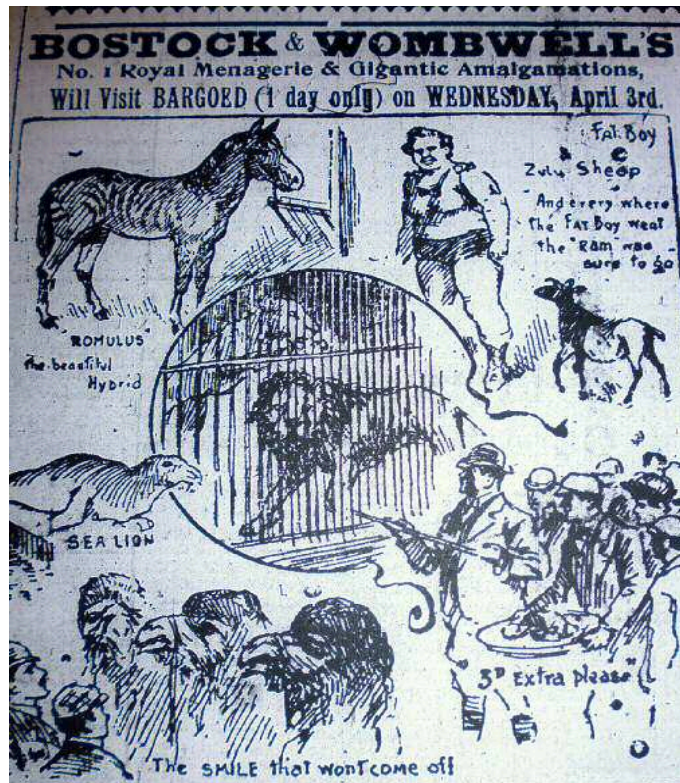


Figure 6 For one day only  
(Source: *Bargoed Journal*, April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1907)

The entertainment provided usually consisted of a lively mix of melodrama, farce, dance, song and recitation, often drawing on older cultural traditions. In an article on portable theatres in Wales, published in 1952, Cecil Price writes:

*There was nothing at all formal about these theatres, and the actors were able to make a direct and intimate appeal of the kind also found in the music hall. Their audiences were unsophisticated and liked broad jokes, rude wit and violent action. They had come there to enjoy themselves in their own way, and they warmed their hands at the open braziers, satisfied their appetites by*

*roasting potatoes or chestnuts on the fire, and satisfied their instincts by applauding the heroine and hissing the villain.*<sup>9</sup>

These travelling theatres were very much a provincial equivalent to London's 'penny gafs'. Although much of the entertainment was undoubtedly bawdy, some companies prided themselves on providing better quality, more respectable drama. For example, John Hord's Cambrian theatre spent over twenty years in the south Wales area from around the mid 1850s. He returned to Merthyr Tydfil every November initially for a one-month season, extending this to six months from around 1865. The company specialised in staging new plays that had local or topical interest and generally attracted full houses and a positive local press. For example, the people of Neath 'gladly welcomed Mr Hord when he pitched his tent among them on Tuesday last. The performances have been exceedingly well attended and some of the actors would not disgrace an establishment having greater pretensions to merit. The decorum is kept'.<sup>10</sup>

Local reactions were not always so hospitable. The company's residency at Tredegar Temperance Hall in 1865 was initially welcomed with the local paper recording that 'this densely populated neighbourhood' would be entertained by 'one of the most respectable companies we ever had the pleasure of patronizing'. On the opening night every available seat was taken within twenty minutes and more than 200 people were turned away. One of the main plays, *The Poor of Tredegar*, included a scene of a burning house that was said to have created 'quite an impression'.<sup>11</sup> However, the residency was cut short after just one month when the Temperance Hall's Committee of Management was suspended and a new committee installed. The Hall minutes recorded:

*It must have been mismanagement to allow the use of (the hall) to Jim Mace and such like folks, the various companies of strolling play actors and others, no matter who or what, if money, the root of all evil, could be secured thereby. If the magnificent building has been a disgrace to total abstinence, to the town and, even, to our civilization hitherto, if, after the change [of*

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<sup>9</sup> Cecil Price, 'Portable Theatres in Wales 1843-1914', *National Library of Wales Journal*, 9 (1955-6), p. 66.

<sup>10</sup> *Cambrian*, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1861.

<sup>11</sup> D. J. Davies, *The Tredegar Workmen's Hall, 1861-1951* (1952), p.32.

management] which is about to be made, it becomes, to an equal extent, our credit we shall joyfully say 'management is everything.'<sup>12</sup>

### **The demand for innovation and spectacle**

There was clearly a strong demand for 'amusement' and travelling showmen were ever alert to commercial opportunities to adapt new technologies to meet popular tastes. The names of shows were exotic, and often had scientific connotations. Charles (or Chas) Poole's Myriorama (Figure 7), for example, which toured extensively in south Wales, consisted of paintings of exotic scenes from around the world on thin but tough material, each scene being full stage size in height and breadth. As each picture was presented, spotlights and sound effects were used to add drama and a dapper guide dressed in white collar and tails used a long stick to point out important features. After a dozen or so screens, a variety act would take to the stage whilst the next roller was prepared.

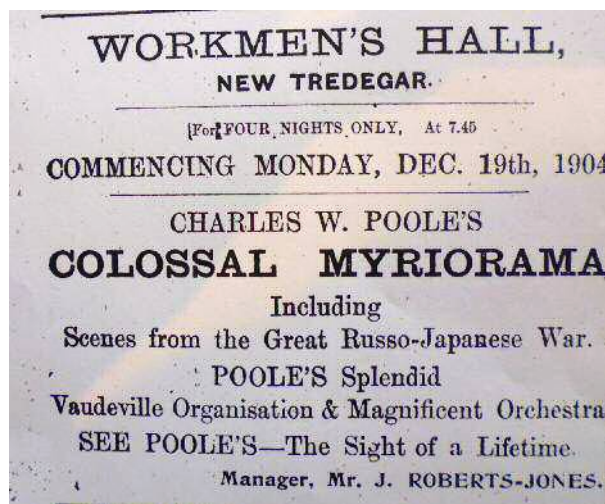


Figure 7 Poole's Colossal Myriorama  
(Source: *Bargoed Journal*, December 17<sup>th</sup> 1904)

By drawing on, often spurious, scientific and educational references, entertainers sought to legitimise their shows at a time when mindless amusement drew harsh criticism. If an entertainer could introduce an educative element, with a lecture or a demonstration of the latest scientific invention, the authorities were more likely to be tolerant. A number of showmen adopted the title Professor or Doctor to provide added professional credibility. In May 1896 Aberdare was visited by the

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Davies, *The Tredegar Workmen's Hall*, p.32.

hypnotist Professor Morris who had travelled to the town accompanied by a man he had hypnotized that morning in Cardiff. Professor Morris and his companion were greeted by a number of the town's 'influential gentlemen', including the local doctor. The hypnotic subject was placed in a glass coffin and paraded through the town accompanied by 'several thousands of spectators'. The spectacle culminated in a 'grand concert' in the evening at which the audience was treated to the subject being awakened, a lecture on hypnotism and a 'splendid lot of variety artistes'.<sup>13</sup> In Bargoed, the New Hall Theatre opened in February 1908 with 'Dr Walford Bodie and his talented combination of first class artistes' (Figure 8). In its review of Dr Bodie, the *Bargoed Journal* reported:

*Then came the one and only Bodie, the bloodless surgeon, one of the most wonderful men of the twentieth century...He went through a series of electric marvels, including that of the Cage of Death, at which feat the famous doctor challenges the world. This performance brings forth tears, cheers and screams of laughter; indeed staggering and bewildering is this wonderful man. Dozens of cures have been effected this week on patients discharged from our leading hospitals as incurable. They come on stage with crutches, leg irons etc and walk off rejoicing. Hundreds will bless the day he ever visited the Rhymney Valley.<sup>14</sup>*

Figure 8 Dr Walford Bodie's cures  
(Source: *Bargoed Journal*, January 30<sup>th</sup> 1908)

<sup>13</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 30th May, 1896.

<sup>14</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 6<sup>th</sup> February 1908.



As an aside, the following year in November 1909 Bodie was forced to cut short his show at the Glasgow Coliseum when a large number of students amongst the 3,000 strong audience showered him with pease meal so he ‘presented the appearance of a baker,’ pelted him with eggs and shouted ‘No doctor,’ ‘Swank’ and ‘Away and pass your prelim, you Merry Devil’.<sup>15</sup> Bodie’s subsequent criticism of the protesters as ‘beggarly Carnegie students’ elicited a swift response. One thousand and four hundred students surreptitiously pre-booked tickets for another Bodie show at the Coliseum with the intention of forcing Bodie to apologise and promise to leave the city never to return. Once again they pelted Bodie with ‘obnoxious ammunition’ including eggs, pease meal, apples, bananas and other fruit. However, the theatre’s management had realized something was afoot and a hundred special constables were stationed at the theatre. The students stormed the stage and a chaotic battle ensued, although the students achieved their aim of eliciting an apology from Bodie and his hasty retreat from the city. Although dozens of students were arrested they were heartened by a wire from students in London, where Bodie had fled, stating ‘Leave Bodie to us’.<sup>16</sup>

Asa Briggs has written that the trend for blending self-improvement with entertainment was given considerable impetus by the Great Exhibition held in London in 1851. He argues that the educational aspects of the exhibition, which attracted over six million visitors, should not eclipse the fun surrounding the event. The road leading to the exhibition was full of stalls and sideshows and ‘the incidental business carried on in connection with the exhibition was prodigious’.<sup>17</sup> The Great Exhibition spawned many show-case ‘industrial’ exhibitions across the country. Helen Meller has argued that these exhibitions served a number of purposes.<sup>18</sup> They were ‘thresholds in civic experience’, a barometer of a city’s modernity and economic success, and also provided ‘an ideal method of combining public instruction with entertainment’.<sup>19</sup> A number of south Wales valleys towns proudly hosted their own exhibitions. Methyr Tydfil, for example, held its sixth Flower, Art and Industrial Exhibition in July 1896

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<sup>15</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 13<sup>th</sup> November 1909.

<sup>16</sup> *Cambrian*, 19<sup>th</sup> November 1909.

<sup>17</sup> Asa Briggs, *Mass Entertainment: The Origins of a Modern Industry*, 29<sup>th</sup> Joseph Fisher Lecture in Commerce (The University of Adelaide, 1960), p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Helen E. Meller, *Leisure and the Changing City 1870–1914* (London, 1976).

<sup>19</sup> Meller, *Leisure and the Changing City*, p. 177.

with the local press praising the ‘admirable institution’ for the ‘educational influence it exercises over the young of the district’.<sup>20</sup>

Film, at least initially, was viewed as another technical novelty in an age hungry for innovation and spectacle, and was seized upon by enterprising showmen eager to draw the crowds. Berry, in his review of the first hundred years of cinema in Wales, writes that the first films to be viewed in Wales were shown at Oswald Stoll’s Panopticon in St Mary’s Street, Cardiff in December 1894. Stoll, a showman of long standing, had acquired two penny-in-the-slot Kinetoscope cabinets developed by Thomas Edison in his studio in Orange, New Jersey. The cabinets, which were installed in the ‘curio hall’ offered spectators a peep-hole view of a number of short films including hair being cut in a barber’s shop, a round of a prizefight, skirt dancing and a strong man performing physical jerks.<sup>21</sup>

Projected films were developed just a year or so later by a number of early film pioneers, the most notable being Robert William Paul, his one-time employee Birt Acres, and the Lumiere brothers. The first public screening in Wales was of Birt Acres’ Kineopticon at the Fine Art, Industrial and Maritime Exhibition held in Cathays Park, Cardiff in 1896.<sup>22</sup> The exhibition drew thousands of visitors including many from the south Wales valleys who travelled to the exhibition by train. A delegation of workmen from Aberdare and Merthyr collieries, sent to the exhibition to assess its suitability for an annual outing, described the place as ‘flowing with milk and honey’. On their recommendation, almost two thousand colliers subsequently travelled to the exhibition on a specially commissioned Taff Vale train.<sup>23</sup>

### **From film pioneer to commercial opportunist**

During the early days of film exhibition there was considerable competition between film pioneers. Within the space of just a few months in 1896, Cardiff hosted Birt Acres’ Kineopticon, Robert William Paul’s Theatrograph and the Lumiere brothers’

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<sup>20</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 11<sup>th</sup> July, 1896.

<sup>21</sup> David Berry, *Wales and Cinema: The First Hundred Years* (Cardiff, 1994), p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> Berry, *Wales and Cinema*, p. 23. A plaque in Cardiff University’s Bute building commemorates the first film to be publicly shown in the city.

<sup>23</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 11<sup>th</sup> July 1896.

Cinematographe.<sup>24</sup> Commercial venues were swift to see the money-making potential, and screenings were held in all major south Wales towns. For example, ‘at enormous expense’, the Theatre Royal and Opera House in Merthyr Tydfil featured Paul’s Theatrograph in December 1896. An advertisement billed the show as ‘Same as at the Alhambra Theatre, London. Rage of London. The Talk of Europe. The Greatest Wonder that ever emanated from the Brain of Man. This Great Novelty will be exhibited at every Performance’.<sup>25</sup> Although the *Merthyr Express* concedes that the Theatrograph is a ‘most marvelous instrument’ it saves most of its praise for the accompanying comic play *Muldoon’s Picnic* starring the proprietor of the Theatre Royal, Will Smithson, and his family.

However, early film pioneers were primarily scientists and inventors, not entertainers, and they became disillusioned that film so quickly became ‘the instrument of the showman’ and was so intimately associated with the music hall. By 1900, the early pioneers of film exhibition had left the field. Berry describes how, after just a few years, Birt Acres abandoned film demonstration and returned to his laboratory. He did not want the Kineopticon to become a ‘show’ rather than the ‘remarkable scientific spectacle’ he believed it to be.<sup>26</sup>

However, it was only when showmen replaced inventors that film achieved wide spread distribution and popular appeal. Seldes has written that, ‘The moving picture had to be taken away from its inventors by aggressive and ignorant men without taste or tradition, but with a highly developed sense of business, before it could be transformed from a mechanical novelty into the medium of the first popular art’.<sup>27</sup> It was predominantly people already in the entertainment business who took up the invention, and the spread of the new medium was rapid. In the early years, portable film shows predominated. Bachlin explains this in relation to the need to ‘amortize’ the cost of buying film (renting was not then an option) through numerous showings and this could only be achieved through continual changes of location.<sup>28</sup> By the early 1900s there were some 150 touring film or bioscope shows in the UK, from

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<sup>24</sup> Berry, *Wales and Cinema*, pp. 20-27.

<sup>25</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 19<sup>th</sup> December 1896.

<sup>26</sup> Berry, *Wales and Cinema*, p. 33.

<sup>27</sup> G. Seldes, *The Movies Come From America* (New York, 1931), p. 18.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Bachlin, *Histoire Economique du Cinema*, La Nouvelle Edition (Paris, 1947), quoted by Chanon, *The Dream That Kicks*

small ground booths to magnificent organ-fronted edifices.<sup>29</sup> Many film exhibitors converted from other forms of travelling entertainment. For example, William Haggar abandoned his portable theatre in favour of film and Harry Scard, the proprietor of Wadbrook's Travelling Cinema, had previously operated a ghost show. During the transitional years, many operators incorporated film into their existing shows. For example, Walter Haydn Davies in his recollections of boyhood life in the Bedlinog area in the early 1900s, describes how he saw his first film '*The Funeral of Queen Victoria*' in the same tent as two caged lions called Wallace and Sourpuss. The cages were covered whilst the film was shown so as not to disturb the lions and distract the audience. Following the film, the covers were lifted and Captain Marco put the lions through their reluctant paces.<sup>30</sup> Poole introduced film alongside his Myriorama, and in the space of just a year the name of his show changed at least three times to the Pooleograph, the Myriograph and (when acting as an agent for Edison) the Edison-Poole Eventograph.<sup>31</sup>

Many of the entertainers who converted to film went to considerable trouble to make the housing for their show as impressive as possible. A contemporary commentator describes Haggar's Electric Coliseum, which opened in 1907, as having 'a most beautiful and elaborate front, a mass of gold work and beautiful figures, with lovely paneling at the sides and roofing the stage. The organ was one of the new 110-key Gaviolis, which had just begun to arrive here'.<sup>32</sup> One of the main features of Haggar's show was a troupe of dancing girls (members of his own family) on the walk-up platform. Parading in front of the show to attract customers was a custom borrowed from the travelling theatres. There was also a doorman/lecturer whose job it was to attract potential customers into the show and provide a commentary on the silent films. A contemporary of Haggar remembers Cyril Sydney Yorke, who managed Haggar's Shanty Cinema in Aberdare and also provided the film commentary, 'striding up and down the aisle, adding the voice of comedy and drama when he thought it necessary (and that was often) in true thespian style: "Ha! How

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<sup>29</sup> K. Scrivens and S. Smith, *The Travelling Cinematograph Show* (New Era Publications, 1999).

<sup>30</sup> Walter Hadyn Davies, *Ups and Downs* (Swansea, 1975).

<sup>31</sup> Berry, *Wales and Cinema*, p. 30.

<sup>32</sup> P. R. Greville, *Famous Travelling Bioscope Shows* (London, 1967).

beautifully she sleeps. Little does she know who is around the corner. Who can it be? Why, it's the dastardly Sir Jasper!""<sup>33</sup>

In spite of these efforts, during the period preceding the First World War many travelling theatres, including film shows, were finding it increasingly difficult to compete with the larger, more commodious permanent theatres and halls that were springing up in valleys towns. These theatres engaged touring acting companies and actively promoted the sophistication and respectability of their programmes, which often included the latest films. Travelling theatres appeared tawdry and old fashioned in comparison and experienced growing difficulty securing licenses for their temporary residencies. In 1908, the *Stage Year Book* noted towns in south Wales where 'portables' were not welcome. At Abercarn, for example, 'portables have visited the place but not for the last five years'. Carmarthen was 'visited by portables, but a little difficulty was experienced in obtaining a license'. At Porth, 'portables rarely visit here since Messrs Poole opened the Palace as a permanent place of amusement'.<sup>34</sup> The 1909 Cinematograph Act dealt a further blow to struggling portables by introducing more stringent safety standards. The inflammable nature of celluloid and the inexperience of early projectionists had caused a number of fatal fires that received widespread press coverage. The 1909 Act introduced a range of safety requirements and gave local authorities powers to inspect any premises showing film, whether temporary or permanent.<sup>35</sup>

Some travelling theatre/show owners, such as William Haggar and Charles Poole, responded to these difficult market conditions by setting up permanent bases. Other survival strategies included locating where there was less competition from permanent venues and more actively promoting shows. The future of the Alexandra Portable Theatre was thrown into jeopardy in 1907 when the proprietor, Mr Bert Bremer, died suddenly whilst being rushed to the Old Mill Hotel, Bargoed to undergo an emergency operation. Mr Bremer, a former bank clerk and brother to the famous London actress Miss Winifred Hare, is described in the local press as 'a

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<sup>33</sup> J. Emlyn Evans, *William Haggar, Welsh Film Pioneer* (unpublished, Aberdare).

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Cecil Price, 'Portable Theatres in Wales 1843-1914', *National Library of Wales Journal*, 9 (1955-6), p. 90.

<sup>35</sup> Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks*, pp.160-161.

popular personality and a comedian of more than average merit'.<sup>36</sup> With the resilience characteristic of the portable theatre business, his widow continued with 'the show' including that evening's performance, and ran a spirited campaign to maintain business in the face of growing competition from permanent venues, including the New Hall theatre that Jackson-Withers had opened in Bargoed. Advertisements in the *Bargoed Journal* illustrate her efforts to appeal to the loyalty and pockets of her audiences and to reassure the authorities of her show's respectability. The company's motto was 'a cheap, clean, wholesome night's entertainment for all!' Locals were encouraged to spend their money with a theatre company they knew, not the touring companies ('strangers') that dropped in and out of the permanent theatres and on Saturday nights patrons were promised a free sample of Berry's shoe polish that would 'brighten Daddy's boots and Mammy's heart on Sunday morning'. However, it seems that Mrs Breamer's efforts were unrewarded since by 1914, her theatre, along with many other travelling shows, had gone out of business.<sup>37</sup>

Film continued to be a staple feature of the variety programmes shown by permanent theatres. The New Hall Theatre in Bargoed held its first 'Grand Variety and Bioscope' in March 1908, just one month after the theatre opened. At this time, it was usual for films or bioscopes to appear fairly low down the list of attractions. The New Hall Theatre's Grand Variety and Bioscope included Knoto the continental contortionist, Herbert the man monkey, Texas Bill and Vi and Vera the juvenile entertainers (Figure 9), as well as 'animated pictures of the highest order'.<sup>38</sup> The New Hall Theatre continued to regularly show bioscopes alongside variety acts even when a purpose built cinema was opened immediately opposite the theatre in 1909. Indeed, for four weeks in 1911 it exclusively showed films because it was experiencing 'difficulty securing touring companies'.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 14<sup>th</sup> November 1908.

<sup>37</sup> Cecil Price, 'Portable Theatres in Wales 1843-1914,' *National Library of Wales Journal*, volume 9, 1955-6 (Aberystwyth, 1956), p.92

<sup>38</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 19<sup>th</sup> March 1908.

<sup>39</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 6<sup>th</sup> July 1911.



Figure 9 Variety artistes, the juvenile sisters Vera and Vi  
(Source: postcard provided by Professor Bill Jones)

Not only was film assimilated easily and quickly into pre-existing entertainment genres (most importantly, variety shows), the first generation of purpose-built cinemas also occasionally hosted other entertainments alongside films. For example, the Castle Cinema in Caerphilly held ‘go as you please’ competitions as well as pictures; an ‘opportunity for local talent, instrumentalists, vocalists, conjurers, comedians etc. First prize 20s, second prize 10s, the audience to judge by show of hands’.<sup>40</sup> There was also considerable overlap of content. In the very early days of film, the average length of film was around 40ft that gave a running time of less than a minute. These short films needed as much action and movement as possible; the subjects tended to be dramatic snatches from sporting events, natural phenomena, or civic/royal events. Chanan has written that ‘since each film lasted only a minute or so and the camera was completely static, early film culture was hardly able to contain anything more than a miscellany of visual tit-tats’.<sup>41</sup> A few fictional films were made in these early days, one of the most famous being Lumiere’s Teasing the Gardener (L’arroseur Arrose). Made in 1895, the film involves a young boy stepping on and off a water hose and sending a jet stream of water into the gardener’s face before receiving a beating. Film audiences were keen to see themselves on screen and many enterprising cinema owners shot films of local streets and events. For example, in

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<sup>40</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 29<sup>th</sup> January 1911.

<sup>41</sup> Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks*, p. 26.

1911, the Palace Theatre in Bargoed showed film of the New Tredegar Carnival and the *Bargoed Journal* encouraged people to go and see the film so they can see how they acted when the camera was about.<sup>42</sup> At this time it was not unusual for a dozen or more ‘shorts’ to be interspersed amongst variety acts. As films became longer, they could sustain more complex narrative structures and they increasingly drew on stage and literary works. For example, William Hagggar’s film *The Maid of Cefn Ydfa*, made in 1908, had been a popular stage melodrama. The Welsh tragedy based on a legendary romance between a thatcher and a musician, was first performed on stage in around 1870. The film was one of the longest British features of the day at 3000ft and ran for almost 30 minutes. Within Wales there was also a considerable appetite for films of prize fights. Boxing in both fairgrounds and halls had been a huge spectator attraction in Wales for many years and Berry describes boxing films as ‘failsafe attractions’ in their own right in Wales.<sup>43</sup> Chanan has argued that in the early years of film, there was a strong local flavour to the subject matter just as there had been with earlier cultural forms.<sup>44</sup> As Raymond Williams has written, there are very few early films ‘for which there is not a nineteenth century precedent in drama or entertainment’.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

On the face of it, the strong connection with earlier entertainment forms jars with the portrayal of cinema as a distinctly modern entertainment form, a consequence and a vital component of modern life. The ‘modernity thesis’ proposes that ‘the disruptive economic, social and cultural effects of urbanization and industrialization created a state of constant sensory change, nervous simulation, feverish stress, speed and bodily peril, and that cinema both reflected this state and was a consequence of it, promoting a particular gaze or form of perception’.<sup>46</sup> However, a number of historians have questioned the thesis’ underlying assumption that modern life brought about fundamental changes in human perception and have argued that early films did not reflect a ‘culture of splintered experiences’. Rather, as

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<sup>42</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1911.

<sup>43</sup> Berry, *Wales and Cinema*, p. 29.

<sup>44</sup> Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks*, p. 155.

<sup>45</sup> Raymond Williams, Introduction to Porter, Vincent and Curran, James (eds.), *British Cinema History* (London, 1983).

<sup>46</sup> Biltreyest, Maltby and Meers (eds.), *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity*, p.3.



we have seen above, film and cinema had strong connections with earlier forms of popular culture that greatly eased its assimilation and acceptance. Films were quickly and easily inserted into existing entertainment programmes, in particular the variety shows that were the staple fare of both portable and permanent theatres. There is evidence of cinema entrepreneurs integrating film exhibition into existing social and cultural routines in several European and American locations.<sup>47</sup> There was also considerable overlap of content with film borrowing from the melodramas, farces, songs and recitations of the stage. Rather than breaking down traditional notions of community, the film industry ‘participated fully in modernity’s fascination with, and repackaging of very traditional social forms’.<sup>48</sup> This is not to say that early audiences would not have reacted to film with wonder and surprise; at the time stories abounded of incredulous viewers checking behind the screens for hidden actors. Chanan writes that film ‘must certainly have seemed the crowning achievement in a line of scientific ‘toys’ based on optical illusions which resulted from the investigations of scientists’.<sup>49</sup> However, he doubts that film was perceived as ‘modern leisure’ at the time.<sup>50</sup>

In spite of this appetite for traditional culture and the connections with earlier entertainment forms, ultimately there was something very different about film, and the context into which it emerged and helped shape, that meant that by 1914 cinema had become the most widely distributed cultural form. Film was able to tap into the considerably expanded market for popular entertainment because of the nature of the commodity. Copies can be made of films and films shown in many places at the same time with none of the limitations of live performance that require the presence of performers. As the genre developed, films became longer and more sophisticated, entertainment in their own right rather than variety show fillers. As Briggs has said, over the longer term ‘cinema did not so much divert an older audience from other kinds of entertainment as create an enormous new one’, superlatives being ‘strictly

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<sup>47</sup> For example, Asa Jernudd, ‘Spaces of early film exhibition in Sweden, 1897-1911’ and Thunnis Van Oort, ‘“Christ is coming to the Elite Cinema”: film exhibition in the Catholic South of Netherlands, 1910s and 1920s’, in Biltereyst, Maltby and Meers (eds.), *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity*; and Paul S. Moore, ‘The Social Biograph: Newspapers as Archives of the Regional Mass Market for Movies’ and Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, ‘Modernity for Small Town Tastes: Movies at the 1907 Cooperstown, New York, Centennial’ in Maltby, Biltereyst and Meers (eds.), *Explorations in New Cinema History*.

<sup>48</sup> J. Kember, *Marketing Modernity: Victorian Popular Shows and Early Cinema* (Exeter, 2009), pp.213-4.

<sup>49</sup> Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks*, p. 15.

<sup>50</sup> Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks*, p. 118.

appropriate' in this context.<sup>51</sup> And so cinema was a site for cultural *transformation* as well as cultural *absorption*. It made every effort to stitch itself into the social fabric of everyday life but it also wore the badge of social progress and modernity. As a result, early cinema needs to be seen as a 'dynamic, responsive environment that developed multiple relationships – sometimes at the same time – with its varied audiences'.<sup>52</sup> At the centre of this transformational environment was the cinema entrepreneur, a 'cultural broker', negotiating between the demands of the audience and a range of ideological and regulatory pressures from government and voluntary organisations. In the next chapter we look more closely at who these early cinema entrepreneurs were - their backgrounds, motivations and business practices.

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<sup>51</sup> Asa Briggs, *Mass Entertainment: The Origins of a Modern Industry*, 29<sup>th</sup> Joseph Fisher Lecture in Commerce (The University of Adelaide, 1960)

<sup>52</sup> J. Kember, *Marketing Modernity: Victorian Popular Shows and Early Cinema* (Exeter, 2009), p.213.

## Chapter Four

### **From showman to businessman; the establishment of the first picture palaces, 1910-1920.**

*‘Wonderful are the ways of trade! If one can only get the tip of one’s little finger into the right pie, what noble morsels, what rich esculents, will stick to it if extracted.’*

Anthony Trollope, *The Way We Live Now* (1875)

Albert Jackson-Withers, ‘a tall, loud man with a very large head on which he always wore a very large hat’<sup>1</sup> was one of the first film exhibitors in the South Wales valleys. Born and brought up in London, he moved to south Wales during the boom years of the early 1900s, initially to manage the Theatre Royal, Merthyr Tydfil. A born ‘showman’, he soon expanded his theatre empire and, like many theatre entrepreneurs, initially made use of film as a variety programme filler. However, Jackson-Withers’ involvement with film was to be an enduring one. Together with his solicitor brother Alfred, a quiet scholarly figure (and later, the financier Julian Hodge), he went on to develop one of the largest cinema circuits in Wales that survived largely intact until the 1970s.

Although the Withers’ business is out of the ordinary in terms of its longevity, its history encapsulates the broader transitions that were occurring from live entertainment to the mass exhibition of films and from front-of-house showman to back-room businessman. By studying the Withers family business, it is possible to illuminate some of the most important motivational forces that lay behind entry into what was often a precarious and highly competitive industry.

From an analysis of primary sources, it is possible to classify cinema entrepreneurs into three main categories. Firstly, the theatre and music hall proprietors for whom film was a novel and welcome addition to the well established tradition of variety entertainment; secondly, the local businessmen, new to the entertainment business and keen to cash in on the growing popularity of cinema; and, finally, working men’s institutes and public halls dipping their toes into the waters of commercial film exhibition in order to reap some of the financial benefits for their

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<sup>1</sup> As remembered by his nephew Alan Withers in Timothy O’Sullivan, *Julian Hodge: A Biography* (London 1981).

institutes and members. Whilst this categorization is helpful analytically in identifying variations in motive and modus operandi, it is important to bear in mind that the categories are not entirely watertight. For example, it was not unusual for businessmen to lease out their cinemas to showmen who were old hands at procuring entertainment and filling seats, whilst working-men's institutes often ran profit-seeking operations. Also, some businesses, such as the Withers, encapsulated more than one type – the sharp-nosed businessman in Alfred Withers and the flamboyant showman in Albert Jackson-Withers.

This chapter describes all three types of cinema entrepreneur but, before doing so, it is important to first of all provide an overview of cinema provision during the early years of the twentieth century. Research suggests that although there was considerable diversity and fluidity of provision, it was pre-existing entertainers and venues that dominated in the early years. For example, by 1920 there were at least a hundred venues in the South Wales valleys regularly showing films but only around a third of these had been developed specifically as cinemas.<sup>2</sup>

The majority of venues comprised existing entertainment venues such as theatres, music halls, public halls and working-men's institutes. The photograph of the Victoria Electric Theatre in Dowlais (Figure 10) illustrates how some cinemas were fashioned from existing public halls. A shed-like building was 're-purposed' as a cinema and embellished with an elaborate neo-classical frontage. Film entrepreneurs did what they could to modernise and distinguish their venues but, by and large, the buildings would have been familiar to the locally drawn audiences and so too would have been many of the cinema entrepreneurs who were the theatre proprietors, public hall managers and working men's institute committee members who had been putting on entertainment for south Wales audiences for many years.

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<sup>2</sup> A variety of sources have been used to build up this quantitative picture including company records, local newspapers, local trade directories and Kinematograph Exhibitors' Association year books.

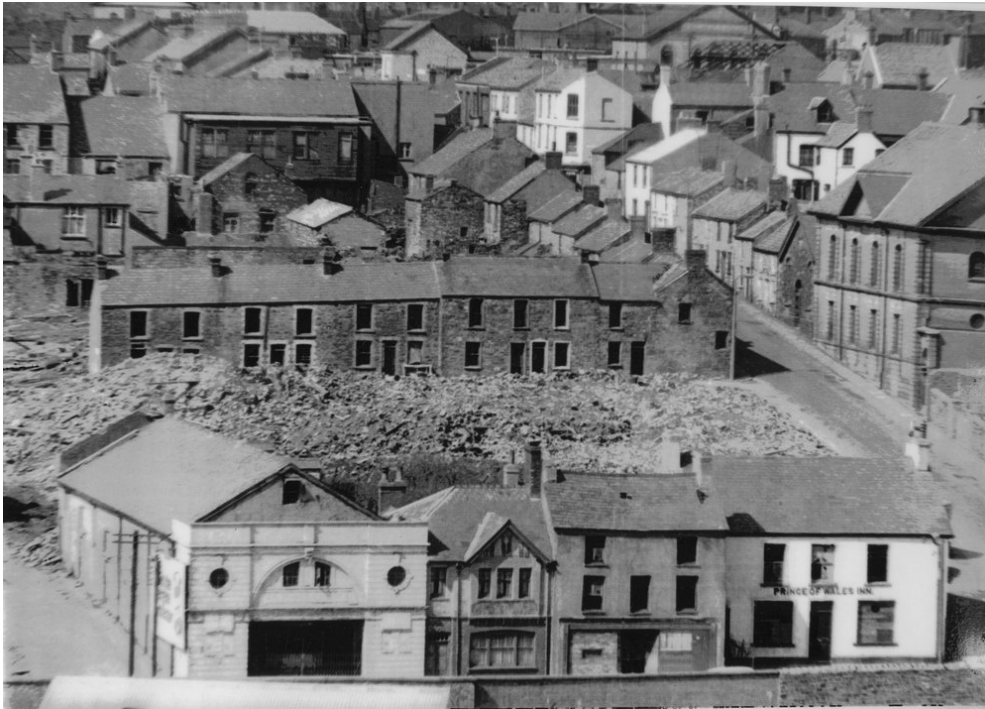


Figure 10 The Victoria Electric Theatre, Dowlais  
(Source: oldmerthyrdfil.com.uk)

As it became clear that film was no passing fad they were joined by a new breed of cinema entrepreneur, local businessmen eager to cash in on the growing popularity of ‘going to the pictures’. Their venues were more likely to be newly built or extensively redeveloped. The detailed description, below, of the Park Picture Palace in Merthyr, that appeared in the *Aberdare Leader* at the time of the cinema’s official opening in March 1914, promotes the building’s combination of sophistication, comfort and safety, suggesting that these features were in short supply in most pre-existing film venues:

*The building has an attractive frontage, elaborately carried out in Carter’s Ceramic Ware. The interior is exceedingly comfortable and well appointed and has seating accommodation for about 620. The seats are of the best and the 3d chairs being the tip-up type. The ventilation is provided by two big fans and windows. There are three wide windows to let in the sunlight during the day-time and there are five emergency exits into the side streets and fire hydrants. The building is heated by means of radiators and gas has been installed in the event of a breakdown in the electric lighting... The proprietors have saved no pains in order to reduce the possibility of fire... The whole building is handsomely decorated, and is the last word in Cinema Palaces. The local public should give the new house a bumper opening.<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>3</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 14th March, 1914.

Peter Miskell describes this lively mix of converted theatres and music halls, small pre-WW1 purpose-built cinemas, working men's institutes and the later, much more limited contribution of inter-war 'super cinemas' in his social history of cinemas in Wales 1918-1952.<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding this diversity of cinema provision, the primary motivation was almost always commercial, building on a well-established tradition of commercial entertainment provision.<sup>5</sup> Cunningham has criticized the tendency in some strands of leisure historiography to chronicle the progression from 'working class self generated leisure (good) to commercialized 'mass' entertainment (bad)' and argues that there was a large popular audience for commercial entertainment from as early as the 1750s.<sup>6</sup> Increased demand for entertainment in urban areas and the greater availability of capital accelerated the pace of commercialization in the late 1800s, but it was the arrival of film, with its unique ability to be replicated and reused, that enabled entertainment entrepreneurs to reach far greater numbers of people thereby maximizing profits. In spite of the growing importance of commercial entertainment, in particular cinema, very little has been written about the entrepreneurs involved. This chapter begins to fill this historiographical gap by describing the three main types of cinema entrepreneur that vied for competitive advantage in the south Wales valleys from cinema's inception in the early 1900s to 1920.

### **Front-line pioneers**

It is unsurprising that theatre proprietors were the first entrepreneurs to show films on a regular basis, and that the theatre/music hall was 'the commercial cinema's first home'.<sup>7</sup> Theatre proprietors had access to venues and audiences and were accomplished entertainment procurers and publicists. They also knew they had to adapt to survive. As we have seen in Chapter Three, many started as travelling entertainers but this livelihood was arduous and poorly rewarded. A number of itinerant entertainers maximized their incomes by involving family members in

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<sup>4</sup> Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*, pp. 36-40.

<sup>5</sup> J. H. Plumb, *The commercialization of leisure in eighteenth-century England* (Reading, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> H. Cunningham, 'Leisure and Culture' in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.) *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950, Volume 2, People and their environment* (Cambridge, 1990), p.306.

<sup>7</sup> Field, Audrey, *Picture Palace: A Social History of the Cinema* (London, 1974).

parallel enterprises. William Haggar's family, for example, ran a number of touring theatrical companies,<sup>8</sup> and Chas Poole, who had toured extensively with his Myrioma from as early as the mid 1800s,<sup>9</sup> developed up to seven versions that toured with various family members. Indeed the *Rhondda Leader* reported in 1906 that 'Messrs. Poole have had to erect more warehouses for the storage of old pictures, many by the old masters, which may at some future date be found very interesting and instructive to the rising generation'.<sup>10</sup> However, it was only by making the transition from roving performer to theatre proprietor that these early showmen could make a sustainable living. It was relatively easy and cheap to lease premises (often part of a multi-functional public building) and their contacts within the entertainment business meant that they could procure a range of entertainers to provide the colourful and varied entertainment programmes favoured by valleys audiences.

Many theatre proprietors scaled up, leasing a number of theatres to form what was termed a 'circuit', thereby making it possible to block-book entertainers for several venues, a cost effective arrangement for artistes and proprietors alike. They frequently advertised in the trade press for suitable artistes, as the advertisement placed in *The Era* in 1885 by Will Smithson of the Theatre Royal, Merthyr Tydfil demonstrates:

*Wanted, good comedy, burlesque and dramatic company or anything good. Sept 16<sup>th</sup>, Nov 5<sup>th</sup> and Xmas. Now booking for Theatre Royal, Merthyr, New Theatre, Aberdare and a few other theatres. Welsh season arranged. Just finished with J W Turner's English Opera and Croacher's Horses.*<sup>11</sup>

By 1900 Smithson was advertising in *The Era* for artistes to be booked at five other theatres in England and Wales,<sup>12</sup> was boasting that £800 had been spent adding another tier to the Theatre Royal in Merthyr and signed himself off as 'the Mascotte' the man who made money in Wales'.<sup>13</sup> Although theatre circuits were common in the

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Yorke, *William Haggar, Fairground Film Maker; Biography of a pioneer of the cinema* (Mid Glamorgan, 2007)

<sup>9</sup> The myriorama is described in Chapter Three.

<sup>10</sup> *Rhondda Leader*, 21<sup>st</sup> July 1906.

<sup>11</sup> *The Era*, 17<sup>th</sup> August 1895.

<sup>12</sup> *The Era*, 13<sup>th</sup> January 1900.

<sup>13</sup> *The Era*, 7<sup>th</sup> July 1900. Las Mascotte was a popular comic opera by Edmund Audron that was played widely in the late 1800s. The title in English is said to have initiated the use of the word mascot to mean an animal, human or thing that brings luck.

south Wales valleys,<sup>14</sup> it is difficult to be precise about their constituency and chronology as arrangements were often fluid. Leases changed hands frequently, with many theatre proprietors only taking up residency for the winter season. Furthermore, many theatre proprietors cooperated on a semi-formal basis leaving no contractual paper trail.

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, Albert Jackson Withers serves to illustrate this type of theatrical entrepreneur. Although, in the early 1900s, he was a relative newcomer to the theatrical world, he and his family had a strong interest in theatre-going and amateur dramatics. The photographs below (Figure 11) show family members bedecked in a variety of exotic costumes.

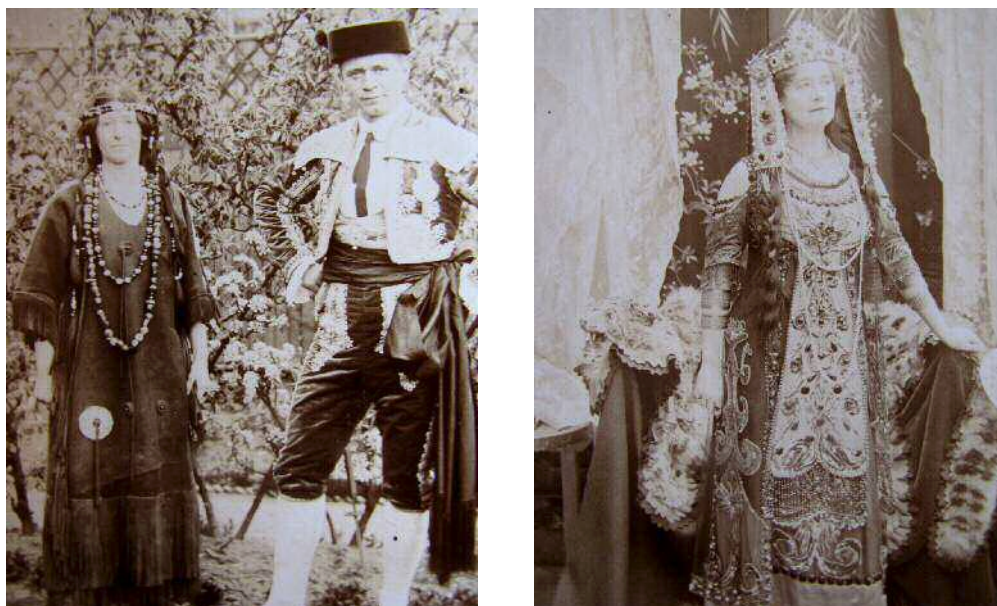


Figure 11 Withers family members  
(Source: papers in possession of author)

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<sup>14</sup> For example, Chas Poole leased at least six theatres or halls in south Wales. In 1906 he acquired the lease of the Opera House in Porth and established a hall of varieties under the title 'The Palace'. He was also leasee of The Opera House, Treherbert, the Palace Theatre, Ammanford, the Gem Cinema, Measteg, The Grand, Aberaman and the Palace Theatre, Gloucester (where he was based). Other theatrical circuits included those of George H. Pitt who was based at the Theatre Royal in Pontypool and also leased theatres at Abersychan, Blaenavon, Caerphilly, Llanbradach and Pontnewydd, and Will Stone who was based at the New Hippodrome, Tonypany and had venues at Blackwood, Dowlais, Ebbw Vale and Rhymney.



Jackson Withers was born Albert Edward Withers to comfortable middle class parents (father a pawn-broker/jeweler) in Wandsworth, South London. In 1901 at the age of 22 he was working as a corn merchant and lodging with his employer in Maida Vale.<sup>15</sup> However, his mercantile career was short-lived as five years later in 1906 he had joined forces with his solicitor brother Alfred Withers to establish Sites Ltd, a limited liability company that aimed to:-

*present, produce, manage, conduct and represent at any theatre, music hall or place of amusement or entertainment, such plays, dramas, comedies, operas, burlesques, pantomines, promenade and other concerts, musical and other pieces, ballets, shows, exhibitions, variety and other entertainments as the company may from time to time think fit.*<sup>16</sup>

They paid a music hall manager, Thomas Montague Sylvester, £1000 in paid up shares to secure suitable premises outside London where set up costs were lower than in the capital. Company records reveal that two theatres were acquired, The New Hippodrome in West Bromwich and the Theatre Royal in Merthyr Tydfil, both under the auspices of separate companies.<sup>17</sup> Withers family members were involved in the business; three brothers (including Albert and Alfred), a sister and a brother-in-law were share-holders, Alfred was a company director and Albert company secretary. However, it seems that Albert's talents lay more in showmanship than company administration as he failed to make the necessary annual returns to Companies House and by 1908 had been replaced as company secretary and was working as theatrical manager at the Theatre Royal in Merthyr Tydfil. It also appears that he spent a managerial stint at the New Hippodrome, West Bromwich, since he married the actress Marie Cecilia Wall in West Bromwich in 1908 and when he arrived in Wales, a Welsh newspaper reports him as having arrived from West Bromwich.<sup>18</sup>

The Withers brothers clearly had expansionist ambitions for their theatre business. In 1908 they leased the first public hall in Bargoed, the aptly named New

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<sup>15</sup> Census 1901, H.M.S.O., London.

<sup>16</sup> BT31/17694/87860, Board of Trade papers, The National Archives.

<sup>17</sup> The New Hippodrome West Bromwich Co. Ltd (BT31/20480/120332, Board of Trade papers, The National Archives): South Wales Entertainments Ltd (BT31/11649/90062, Board of Trade papers, The National Archives).

<sup>18</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 16<sup>th</sup> January 1909.

Hall,<sup>19</sup> in January 1909 they signed a three-year lease for the Grand Theatre at Aberaman<sup>20</sup>; and in August 1909 they took out a twenty-one year lease on the Theatre Royal, Cardiff.<sup>21</sup>

However, it is likely that the Withers overstretched themselves financially as a number of business failures ensued in 1910. In that year, Sites Ltd applied to court to have 7,902 fully paid up £1 shares in the company reduced to 10 shillings each, thereby cancelling '£3951 capital which has been lost or is unrepresented by available assets'.<sup>22</sup> This meant all twenty-seven shareholders (including five Withers family members) lost half the capital they had invested. The New Hippodrome, West Bromwich Co Ltd survived only five years dissolving in 1912.<sup>23</sup>

The Withers' involvement with the Grand Theatre at Aberaman and the Theatre Royal in Cardiff was even shorter-lived. In March 1910, a little over a year since they took over the Grand Theatre, the Institute committee agreed to transfer the lease to the theatrical entrepreneur Chas Poole.<sup>24</sup> It had not been an auspicious start for the Withers. Within days of opening the Grand Theatre, the resident manager, Reginald Taylor, absconded to London and then Paris with £29 and 8 shillings, three days takings. Described in the local press as 'short of stature, slender of build and of that dark complexion characteristic of the Spaniard or Italian', Taylor was eventually apprehended and sentenced to six months imprisonment.<sup>25</sup> Although news coverage in the theatrical newspaper, *The Era*, suggests that these sorts of embezzlements were not uncommon at the time, the incident is likely to have been a blow for Alfred Jackson-Withers whose front-of-house presence so clearly associated him with the business

Jackson-Withers' tenure at the Theatre Royal, Cardiff was also cut short. The company he and his brother Alfred Withers were directors of, Cambrian Theatres Ltd, was formed in 1909 with a nominal capital of £5,000 to acquire the lease of the

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<sup>19</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 6<sup>th</sup> February 1908.

<sup>20</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 26<sup>th</sup> December 1908.

<sup>21</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 14<sup>th</sup> August 1909.

<sup>22</sup> BT31/17694/87860, Board of Trade papers, The National Archives.

<sup>23</sup> BT31/20480/120332, Board of Trade papers, The National Archives.

<sup>24</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 12<sup>th</sup> March 1910.

<sup>25</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 10<sup>th</sup> January 1909.

theatre for a term of 21 years. However, just one year later, in 1910 the company went into voluntary liquidation with liabilities of £1392 (£1210 of which was unsecured) and only £88 11s in assets. A pantomime company that Jackson-Withers had set up (which was based at the Cardiff theatre and toured the south Wales valleys with a cast of more than sixty) had made heavy losses and the local authority had also intimated that the theatre's license would not be renewed unless the building was entirely remodeled. Since 'no funds were forthcoming it was decided to go into voluntary liquidation'.<sup>26</sup> It was solicitor Alfred Withers who presented the 'statement of affairs' to a meeting of creditors and shareholders. There is evidence of disquiet amongst some shareholders and creditors, in particular with the appointment of the liquidator. A solicitor representing a number of creditors and shareholders stated that when the matter of the appointment of the liquidator came before the court it would be strenuously opposed.<sup>27</sup> The primary duty of a liquidator is to the company's creditors and so it is essential that they work independently of the company directors. The fact that the liquidator appointed was based in the same building in High Holborn, London as Alfred Withers may well have raised concerns of partiality.

The Withers' involvement with the Theatre Royal, Merthyr Tydfil lasted for eight years, ending in 1915 when South Wales Entertainments Co. Ltd. was dissolved. Will Smithson, who had been owner and manager of the Theatre Royal prior to Jackson-Withers' arrival, returned from the Empire Palace, Barnsley to run the theatre once more.<sup>28</sup> The Withers' connection with the New Hall, Bargoed lasted much longer, ending dramatically in 1958 with the destruction of the hall by fire.<sup>29</sup>

Although theatre proprietors were quick to understand and reap the commercial benefits of film, only a handful, including the Withers, made the transition from part-time to full-time film exhibition and even they had their financial difficulties. The willingness of theatre proprietors to embrace the medium seems clear enough. They were the pioneers of film exhibition and were actively involved in establishing the industry's credentials. For example, the theatre proprietor Will Stone

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<sup>26</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 17<sup>th</sup> September 1910.

<sup>27</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 27<sup>th</sup> August 1910.

<sup>28</sup> *The Era*, April 9<sup>th</sup> 1898 reports on Will Smithson buying the freehold of the Theatre Royal Merthyr, having leased it for 4 years since 1894.

<sup>29</sup> Gelligaer Historical Society, *Bargoed and Gilfach: A Local History* (Pontypool, 2011).

was the first chairman of the South Wales branch of the Kinematograph Exhibitors' Association when it was established in 1917, and other theatre proprietors were strongly represented on the trade body.<sup>30</sup> However, many theatre proprietors continued to have strong connections to the world of live entertainment. For example, Chas Poole and his family continued to show the Myrioma until shortly before his death in 1918<sup>31</sup> and, in spite of regularly exhibiting films, the family continued to promote the superiority of the Myrioma in recreating incidents from real life.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, many theatre proprietors had thespian connections. Jackson-Withers was married to the actress Marie Wall and, at least in the early years of their marriage, he actively cultivated her career. For example, she was a member of the pantomime company set up by Withers in 1909 although as we have seen the company was short-lived.<sup>33</sup> The final performance of *Mother Goose* was given at the Grand Theatre at Aberaman in March 1910, the local newspaper reporting that 'the piece has improved to such an extent that it is far superior to the original production'.<sup>34</sup> 'Mrs Withers (Miss Marie Wall) was presented with a beautiful bouquet of flowers from the body of the hall'.<sup>35</sup> Thereafter, it appears that motherhood and public good works took the place of walking the boards for Marie Wall as no further press references to her acting career have been uncovered. Jackson-Withers clearly had a personal as well as business interest in theatre and opera. He is described as the 'heart and soul' in the formation of an operatic society in Bargoed in 1911.<sup>36</sup> The society put on the *Pirates of Penzance* during coronation week in 1911, the local paper reporting that Jackson-Withers had worked 'indefatigably hard to make it a success' with the proceeds going to charity.<sup>37</sup>

Will Smithson of the Theatre Royal, Merthyr Tydfil had a daughter Florence (pictured below, Figure 12) who became a celebrated actress and singer, the

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<sup>30</sup> Kinematograph Year Book, 1918

<sup>31</sup> *Amman Valley Chronicle*, 21<sup>st</sup> March 1918.

<sup>32</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 14<sup>th</sup> August 1914.

<sup>33</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 17<sup>th</sup> September 1910.

<sup>34</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, March 12<sup>th</sup> 1910.

<sup>35</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 19<sup>th</sup> March 1910.

<sup>36</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 12<sup>th</sup> January 1911.

<sup>37</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, June 1<sup>st</sup> 1911

‘nightingale of Wales’.<sup>38</sup> In 1914 she gave an interview to the *Evening News* in which she described how she had entered the profession:-

*When I was 14 or 15 years of age I was playing in dramas at my father's own theatres. He then owned houses in Pontypridd and Merthyr. By the way. it was at the latter place, where we were residing, that I got my first offer to appear in grand opera. Our house adjoined the theatre, and on my return from school one afternoon I sat at the piano and sang through one or two songs. Signor Galeffi, whose opera company happened to be appearing that week, came from the theatre just as I was warming to my work and seeing my father, asked, 'Who is that singing?' When he had ascertained the owner of the voice he came in and begged me to sing to him. Now, I had a mania for operas, and as he sat and played for me I sang through the various numbers, giving him of my very best. Signor Galeffi was exceedingly enthusiastic at the conclusion, and begged my father to allow me to tour with his company, a request which met with refusal. However, eventually an engagement was sanctioned, and for a period of two years I did pretty well the whole work of that company. In the provinces we performed 21 operas, and I have undertaken two prima donna parts in one night. But I loved the work. Of her first success in London she says: "I felt that everything depended on my first performance in the great Metropolis, and then, in consequence of my being the only unknown person in the cast, I was the only one who walked on in silence. Everybody else had been applauded. However, my song started immediately, so it was not too embarrassing. I finished in dead silence. Horror! Was I a failure? But only for a few seconds, and then came a burst of applause which told me that I was 'made'".<sup>39</sup>*

Although they were in the vanguard of film exhibition it seems that many theatrical entrepreneurs retained strong attachments to older entertainment forms. For example, it is telling that as late as 1924, when the Withers were running multiple cinemas, Jackson-Withers described himself as a ‘theatrical manager’ rather than ‘cinema manager’.

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<sup>38</sup> The National Portrait gallery holds 32 portraits of Florence Smithson including brief biographical details. M. Millson Disher describes Florence Smithson’s life, including her marriage to music hall performer Dan Rolyat, in her book *Winkles and champagne: Comedies and Tragedies of the Music Hall* (1938).

<sup>39</sup> Reported in the *Merthyr Pioneer*, 10<sup>th</sup> January 1914.



Figure 12 Florence Smithson  
(Source: National Portrait Gallery)

There were other factors that may have hindered the transition to full-time film exhibition. Following a number of serious fires in cinemas, the Cinematograph Act 1909 introduced a rash of safety requirements and gave local authorities the powers to inspect premises and impose additional licensing requirements. These had significant practical and cost implications for theatre proprietors who were operating out of pre-cinema age buildings and were facing growing competition from a new generation of purpose built cinemas.

It could be argued that the ultimate success of the Withers' business lay in its combination of old style showmanship in Albert Jackson-Withers and hard nosed business acumen in Alfred Withers. In one family they encapsulated the transition from personality-driven purveyor of entertainment to profit-seeking business although, as we shall see below, many 'new-style' companies were far from impersonal and were, in fact, closely connected to their local communities.

## The emergence of the back-room businessman

The second group of cinema entrepreneurs comprised the specialist cinema companies established from around 1910 to cash in on the growing popularity of cinema-going. Their venues were almost always purpose built or substantially redeveloped and, although in the early days it was not unusual to intersperse films with variety acts, their primary objective was to exhibit films.

During the eleven years from 1910 to 1920, at least forty-three specialist cinema companies were established in the south Wales valleys. The National Archives hold records for 35 of the 43 companies identified and the records of 31 companies have been analysed here. This is the first time to my knowledge that cinema company records have been analysed in this way, and they provide important insight into who lay behind the businesses, how businesses were funded and how successful they were. Annex 1 describes the company record sources whilst Annex 2 lists the companies included in the analysis.

Table 1 shows that the great majority (80%) of cinema companies were incorporated in the first half of the decade when commercial interest in film exhibition was at its height in south Wales and the economic impact of World War One had yet to be felt. Peter Miskell confirms the extent of this early investment attributing the lack of cinema building during the inter-war years in the south Wales valleys to ‘the generous provision of halls from the pre-1918 era {which} was sufficient to satisfy the demand of a declining population’.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Peter Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits; A social history of the cinema in Wales 1918-1951* (Cardiff, 2006), p. 39

**Table 1 Year company was incorporated**

Year	No. of companies	% of companies
1911	4	13%
1912	8	26%
1913	7	23%
1914	4	13%
1915	1	3%
1916	0	0
1917	1	3%
1918	0	0
1919	3	10%
1920	1	3%
Total	31	100%

Who were these entrepreneurs? Annual company returns record the occupation and address of company directors and we know from this source that the great majority of directors were locally based, 79% from the south Wales valleys and a third (30%) from the same town the cinema was located in (Table 2).

**Table 2 Place of abode of directors<sup>41</sup>**

Place of abode	No. of directorships	% of directorships
Same town as cinema	55	30%
Other valleys town	92	49%
Newport/Cardiff	29	16%
Other location, Wales	1	1%
England/elsewhere	9	5%
	186	100%*

\* Rounded to 100%

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<sup>41</sup> By directorship



Table 3 shows that over half of company directors were either local traders (36%) or professionals (19%). Other directors were a mixture of merchants/manufacturers (9%), contractors/builders (8%) and people linked professionally to the theatre/cinema industry (8%). The scant representation of people with a background in entertainment underlines the shift that was occurring from professional entertainers to entrepreneurs with an eye to a potential profit. A small number of theatre proprietors, such as Jackson-Withers, did become full-time cinema proprietors but only when the popularity of theatre/variety had begun to wane and it was clear that cinema was to be a permanent feature on the leisure landscape. A wide range of trades-people were involved in cinema companies from traditional trades such as inn-keeping, boot-making and butchery to more novel occupations such as pianoforte and cycle sales suggestive of the growing affluence of the south Wales valleys. Almost a third (32%) of all professionals involved were solicitors with other professionals including auctioneers, architects, doctors, dentists and engineers.

**Table 3 Occupation of directors**

Occupation	No. of directors	% of directors
Local trade	52	36%
Professional	28	19%
Merchant/manufacturer	13	9%
Cinema/theatre business	12	8%
Contractor/builder	11	8%
Other	23	16%
Not known	5	3%
Total	144	100%*

\* Rounded to 100%

Local professionals were often the catalyst for the development of cinemas. Solicitors, in particular, had a pivotal role. One business historian describes them as the ‘principal godfather’ of company formation at this time; the solicitor ‘frames, or at least revises the prospectus; he trims up the articles of association; he is unquestionably the best judge of the whole transaction which he is helping to draw the public into’. These professionals were part of an embryonic middle class, a tight knit, well-connected group who developed alliances and business interests across their community and further afield. Their business interests were often wide-ranging and

although almost always self-serving they were presented and largely accepted as being of mutual benefit to the local community. In setting up cinema companies professionals forged partnerships with local trades people who became company co-directors.

The evidence suggests that the first cinemas to be developed by local professionals/tradespeople were a competitive reaction to a number of early, externally driven commercial incursions into the valleys. For example, one of the first companies to invest in the south Wales valleys was Associated Electric Theatres, set up in 1910 by two merchants from Cardiff and a 'gentleman' from Stockport. All three were directors (and one a founding director) of London and Provincial Electric Theatres Ltd which had been established in 1899 and already owned several cinematograph theatres in England and Wales.<sup>42</sup> The company had ambitious plans to open ten cinemas including three in Wales, at Newport, Pontypridd and Merthyr. An artist's impression of the elevation of the theatres is shown below (Figure 13).

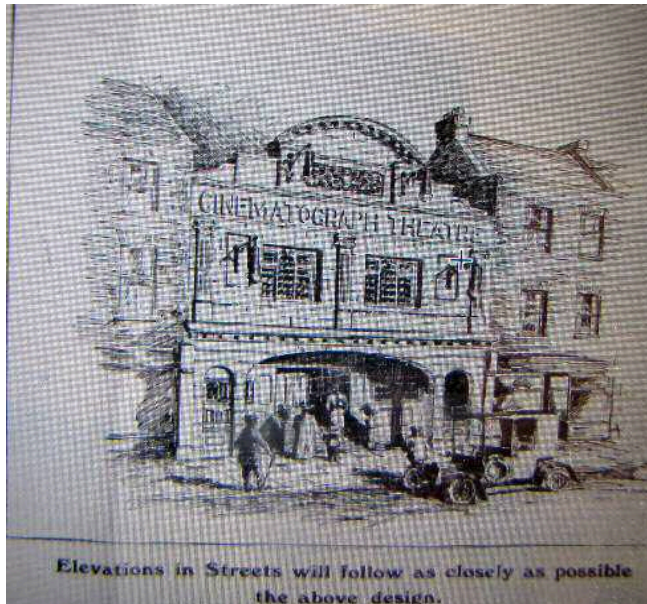
The company prospectus invited shareholders to invest in 100,000 participating shares of ten shillings each and 1,000 one shilling deferred shares, thereby yielding £51,000 capital if all shares were sold. The company predicted a net annual profit of £20,000 on all ten theatres, and dividends of at least 20% on preference shares. However, these predictions proved hopelessly optimistic. In the event, the company sold less than £14,000 worth of shares and company records suggest it opened only three electric theatres, at Merthyr, Newport and Farnborough. The Merthyr Electric Theatre, the first purpose built cinema in the town, was located on the High Street and opened in 1910. However, profits fell far short of expectations; in 1913 the Merthyr theatre made a loss of £592, and the cinema was sold at auction in 1914. The company was eventually dissolved in 1919 (the Farnborough cinema the only surviving cinema) with assets of only £316 and liabilities (to unsecured creditors) of £1,416.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> The London and Provincial Electric Theatres Ltd Company subsequently experienced difficulties due to 'shares, and some capital being held by German subjects and some newspapers [having] taken against it' (Kinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1915).

<sup>43</sup> BT31/19440/109321 and BT34/3561/109321, Board of Trade papers, the National Archives.

Figure 13 Artist's impression of new cinematograph theatre  
(Source: Company Prospectus, Board of Trade papers, the National Archives)



The development of the Merthyr Electric Theatre by external entrepreneurs appears to have been a catalyst for locally driven investment. In 1911, just one year after the Electric Theatre opened, a group of local business people formed a company, the Merthyr Palace Company Ltd, to develop a new cinema at Pontmorlais circus.<sup>44</sup> The cinema entrepreneurs, all new to the entertainment business, comprised an auctioneer, a solicitor, a dental surgeon and four local tradespeople. The driving force behind the initiative appears to have been Henry Seymour Berry, a Merthyr based auctioneer, who later became a major industrial financier working in partnership with Lord Rhondda (and will be discussed further later in this chapter).<sup>45</sup> The company prospectus encouraged investment by stating ‘a few years ago the Picture Palace did not exist, but today it forms the basis of a large and growing industry. Scarcely any town of any size is without a Picture Palace today. A good theatre in a good populous district like Merthyr offers immense possibilities for the lucrative employment of capital in this class of business’. Interestingly, the prospectus borrows heavily from

<sup>44</sup> BT31/32326/59789, Board of Trade papers, the National Archives.

<sup>45</sup> T. Boyns, Rationalisation in the inter-war period: the case of the south Wales steam coal industry, *Business History*, July 1987, Vol.29, pp.282-303. H. S. Berry became Lord Buckland in 1926 but died two years later in a horse riding accident on his estate near Brecon.

that of Associated Electric Theatres which opened the first cinema in Merthyr. The prospectus promised that ‘handsome dividends’ would be paid on the capital invested, suggesting returns of around 20-30%. Local investors greeted the invitation enthusiastically purchasing 4000 of the 5000 £1 shares offered for sale. The company remained in public ownership until 1919 and honoured its promise of handsome returns, paying out dividends in the range of 15% to 35% in its early years. In 1919 the company was liquidated and just a few months later a new company was established with the same name and directors but constituted as a private rather than public company (thereby ensuring that profits went solely to the directors).

The Merthyr Electric Theatre also transferred to local ownership selling at auction in June 1914 to a local businessman Mr J. E. Price of the Mardy Hotel, Merthyr for £3,500.<sup>46</sup> In August 1914 it became the property of the Merthyr Electric Company Ltd, a company set up by Mr Price together with a fellow hotel keeper, a tradesman, a contractor, a colliery manager and a colliery contractor, all from Merthyr. This locally based company survived for forty years, the longest lived of any of the companies analysed for this study, eventually closing in 1954. In its early years it paid out healthy dividends to its local shareholders, around a half of whom were linked to the local colliery and included colliery managers, under-managers, overmen, foremen, firemen, contractors and colliers.<sup>47</sup>

All thirty-one companies analysed for this study were limited liability companies with over two-fifths being public and just over a half private limited liability companies. Table 4 also shows that the proportion of private companies increased over the period 1910 to 1920. This is likely to be due to the gradual influence of the Companies Act 1907 that for the first time gave formal legal recognition to the private limited liability company. Private companies could now be formed with a minimum of two and a maximum of fifty shareholders, but they could not raise capital from the public and were restricted in terms of share transferability. Since most small companies formed following the introduction of limited liability in the mid 1880s met these conditions, many transferred to private company status, and by 1919 more than 90% of newly registered companies were registered as private

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<sup>46</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 27<sup>th</sup> June 1914.

<sup>47</sup> BT31/36351/137500, Board of Trade papers, the National Archives.

companies.<sup>48</sup> Harris argues that the private company was ‘developed from below, created by business persons and their lawyers’ to meet their own needs and circumstances and that the Companies Act 1907 represented the law catching up with common business practice. The cinema trade body, the Kinematograph Exhibitors’ Association, remarked in 1920 on the trend of ‘quietly turning businesses into private limited liability companies’.<sup>49</sup>

**Table 4 Company ownership**

All companies			Companies incorporated 1910-1912		Companies incorporated 1913-1920	
Public	13	42%	9	64%	4	23%
Private	16	52%	4	29%	12	71%
Not known	2	7%	1	7%	1	6%
Total	31	100%*	14	100%	17	100%

\* Rounded to 100%

The cinema companies operating in the south Wales valleys were nearly all small-scale, locally based companies. The thirteen public companies had a median nominal capital of just £6,000 (and the sixteen private companies an even lower median nominal capital of £4,000) - considerably less than the average nominal capital of £33, 519 reported by Harris for public companies registered between 1900 and 1907.<sup>50</sup> Harris uses his findings to argue that the introduction of limited liability led to a surge in small-scale company formation since the average nominal capital for new companies formed between 1863 and 1869 had been significantly higher at over £170000. It is clear that the majority of cinema companies operating in the south Wales valleys were corporate minnows, although we shall come on to see that over a relatively short period of time many became part of a cinema circuit under the auspices of a parent company.

Harris also argues that the great majority of small companies spawned by the introduction of limited liability made no real appeal to the public for capital. Although

<sup>48</sup> Ron Harris, ‘The Private Origins of the Private Company: Britain 1862-1907’, *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* (2013), 33 (2), pp.339-378.

<sup>49</sup> Kinematograph Exhibitors’ Association Year Book 1920

<sup>50</sup> Harris (2013) compiled a dataset of companies registered between 1844 and 2003 (public and private companies and limited partnerships) based on annual reports of the Board of Trade, Department of Trade and Department of Trade and Industry, as well as data on company characteristics, such as nominal capital, taken from annual reports.

this is certainly true of the private companies included in this analysis (since they were by law barred from appealing to the public for capital), the public cinema companies appear to have made very considerable efforts to attract investors. Information on the shareholders of these cinema companies has been drawn from Form E returns that public companies were statutorily required to submit to the Registrar of Companies (now Companies House) on an annual basis. These forms record the name, address and occupation of shareholders in addition to any changes in the amount of individual share holdings in any year.<sup>51</sup> The 13 public cinema companies had a total of 649 shareholders (excluding directors), around 50 shareholders on average for each company.<sup>52</sup>

The average proportion of share value allotted to the public (as opposed to directors or other parties in lieu of services etc) was only 36%. However, this proportion varied considerably between companies. The companies that sold the highest proportion of shares to the public were Aberdare Cinemas (59%), the Merthyr Picture Palace (53%) and Ebbw Vale Cinemas Ltd (48%). The company with the lowest proportion was Associated Electric Theatres (14%). Significant here is the strong connections that the first three companies had with their local communities, whilst Associated Electric Theatres was a national, multi-cinema operation. We have seen that the majority of directors lived close to their cinema business and there can be no doubt that they used their local contacts, plus sometimes a local promoter, to maximize the sale of shares. Over half (51%) of shareholders (excluding directors) lived in the same town as the cinema they were investing in and 93% lived in the south Wales valleys. The impact of local ownership is powerfully illustrated by the example of the Merthyr Electric Theatre Company that took over ownership of the Methyr Electric Theatre from Associated Electric Theatres. When the cinema was in the ownership of Associated Electric only one shareholder was from Merthyr Tydfil and he was the cinema manager; when the cinema transferred to local ownership all but one of the 93 shareholders was from Merthyr Tydfil or the close vicinity and a half (49%) were colliery employees.

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<sup>51</sup> Form Es for wound up companies are found in the BT31 series at the National Archives.

<sup>52</sup> Figures relate to the first year of operation since share ownership changed over time.

Share ownership in cinemas was generally small-scale with two-fifths (38%) of shareholders (excluding directors) owning ten or fewer shares, over half (51%) owning twenty or fewer shares, and less than a tenth (8%) owning more than a hundred shares.<sup>53</sup> Rutterford's analysis of a considerably larger sample of shareholdings across a broad range of companies reinforces the small-scale nature of cinema investment. For the period 1910 to 1919, Rutterford found that only 50% of shareholdings were of more than a hundred shares, but the comparable percentage for cinema companies in the south Wales valleys was considerably lower at 8 per cent.<sup>54</sup> As we have seen with the Merthyr Electric Theatre Company, many shareholders were working class, although tradespeople and professionals such as teachers, doctors, accountants and architects were also strongly represented.

A fifth (21%) of cinema shareholders were women although it is not possible to comment on their occupational status as this went largely unreported in official returns with marital status being reported in its place. Work by Rutterford et al has also revealed the unexpected presence of women investors in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in all forms of public and private companies. For example, they have calculated that over the period 1910 to 1919 over a third (34%) of shareholdings were held by women.<sup>55</sup>

It is important to emphasise here that by the early 1900s there had been a considerable widening of share ownership, to such an extent that some commentators went as far as describing the trend as a 'democratisation of the market'.<sup>56</sup> The Investors' Register describes its members as the 'modern investing public, its personnel numbered by hundreds of thousands and representing every class of society except the absolute destitute'. A range of demand and supply factors had coalesced to

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<sup>53</sup> The analysis of cinema company shareholders undertaken for this thesis includes a total of 649 shareholders.

<sup>54</sup> Rutterford's national share holding sample comprised 33,078 individual shareholdings from 261 share records of 47 different companies over the period 1870-1935. The 1910-1919 sample comprised 7,610 individual share holdings. The 47 companies were sampled from seven sectors. The analysis is included in Janette Rutterford, David R. Green, Josephine Maltby and Alastair Owens, 'Who comprised the nation of shareholders?; Gender and investment in Great Britain, c.1870-1935', *The Economic History Review*, 64/1 (2011), pp. 157-187.

<sup>55</sup> Janette Rutterford, David R. Green, Josephine Maltby and Alastair Owens, 'Who comprised the nation of shareholders?; Gender and investment in Great Britain, c.1870-1935', *The Economic History Review*, 64/1 (2011), pp. 157-187.

<sup>56</sup> Nancy Henry and Cannon Schmitt (eds.), *New Perspectives on Finance and Culture*, (Bloomington, 2009), p.7

create this 'nation of shareholders'. As described in the introduction, on the supply side the introduction of limited liability significantly increased the number of companies seeking to raise capital from the public, and as a consequence shares had dropped considerably in value and there was a growing availability of preference shares and debenture stock that were lower risk alternatives to ordinary shares. The returns on company shares had also been strong, far exceeding the income earned from government securities. There was also growing diversification of investment opportunities, including many in novel and developing technologies such as film exhibition. On the demand side, real incomes were rising and people with relatively modest amounts of savings were looking for lucrative sources of investment. Newspapers, including the local press, regularly reported on the launch of new companies and the handsome dividends being paid to subscribers. The limited liability business model was even applied to community initiatives. In July 1919, at a well-attended meeting of the Bargoed and District AFC, it was unanimously agreed that a limited liability company with a nominal capital of £3000 in £1 shares should be formed to bolster the club's chances of entering the second division of the Southern Counties league. A strong club would 'keep young folk at home on Saturdays and avoid their going to Cardiff, Merthyr and Newport to witness matches'. Not only did limited liability minimize the risks associated with investment but it also represented 'the installment system brought to the highest state of perfection'. Although the Bargoed and District AFC shares were valued at £1, a shareholder need only pay 5s initially and even this could be paid in two installments. Over £500 was subscribed at the meeting and it was anticipated that 'every person having the interest of sport at heart should not hesitate at taking up at least one share'.<sup>57</sup>

Company prospectuses were used as marketing tools to attract investment. Given that cinema companies had no proven track record the prospectus was an important mechanism for reassuring potential investors that they were in good hands. They cited the strong share performance of leaders in the cinema industry and named the directors, bankers, auditors, solicitors and other reputable professionals that would be associated with the company thereby endorsing the solidity of the business proposition. However, personal contacts were likely to have been even more

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<sup>57</sup> *Monmouth Guardian*, 25<sup>th</sup> July 1919.



important in the south Wales valleys given the geographical proximity of entrepreneurs and investors. Formal cinema openings were an opportunity to court local 'worthies', secure news coverage and sell further shares. At the opening of the first cinema in New Tredegar (to which over 500 people were invited) one of the directors is quoted as saying that 'some people felt they had been overlooked in the matter of shares and there were still some 200 to dispose of out of the 2000 that had initially been made available'.<sup>58</sup>

The first wave of cinema investment in the larger, more established towns such as Pontypridd and Merthyr, very quickly cascaded out to smaller surrounding towns. It was usually the directors of the first wave cinemas that drove this investment, often in partnership with tradespeople from the smaller towns. For example, directors of the Merthyr Palace Co. Ltd spearheaded the development of a number of cinemas including cinemas at Tredegar (1911), Ebbw Vale (1912) and Aberaman (1913). In turn, two directors of the Ebbw Vale cinema were involved in setting up a cinema in Brynmawr.<sup>59</sup> The same cascade effect occurred in the Bargoed area where directors of the Bargoed Electric Theatre Co. Ltd were involved in establishing cinemas at Blackwood, Abertillery, Pengam, New Tredegar, Mountain Ash and Crumlin. This cascade of investment occurred rapidly over a period of just a few years. As the example of the Bargoed Palace below illustrates, in many cases the paint had quite literally not dried before cinemas threw open their doors for the first time to an eagerly awaiting public:-

*The new Picture Palace, Bargoed, was opened last Thursday, and the free matinee given to celebrate the occasion attracted crowds upon crowds and at the various intervals as one audience departed another immediately occupied the seats. Unfortunately, as events proved, the opening was somewhat premature and disappointing. In the first place the electric apparatus had not been fully and finally installed and the light was consequently intermittent, at times very dim and never very brilliant. The screen had only just received its final coat of paint which was consequently wet, and still further dimmed the lustre of the pictures. However, the pictures were clear enough to raise the applause of the large number of children present, and the adults were as interested in some of the episodes brought before their eyes as were the youngsters.<sup>60</sup>*

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<sup>58</sup> *Merthyr Express*, July 13<sup>th</sup> 1912.

<sup>59</sup> BT31/13934/123070, Board of Trade papers, the National Archives.

<sup>60</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 19<sup>th</sup> November 1909.

Henry Seymour Berry was clearly a pivotal figure in these developments. In addition to being a director of the Merthyr Palace Cinema Ltd, he acted as company secretary to new cinemas developed at Ebbw Vale, Aberaman, Aberfan, Rhymney and Aberdare. He was also paid to help set up and promote a number of cinemas. For example, he shared £500 with the company's solicitor and architect for the promotion of the Ebbw Vale cinema<sup>61</sup> and received £300 'for services rendered in connection with formation and promotion of the (Aberaman) company'.<sup>62</sup> Berry is likely to have earned his fee in relation to the cinema at Aberaman since the venture was fiercely opposed by the Aberaman Working Men's Institute which had been showing films on a regular basis for a number of years and was deeply resentful of the competition. A further development was the consolidation of cinemas into cinema circuits, often overseen by a parent company. Although this was to occur on a much more extensive scale in later years (as discussed in Chapters Seven and Eight), by World War One it was already a strong feature on the business landscape. For example, by 1916 Henry Seymour Berry had set up Merthyr Cinemas Ltd, a parent company to oversee a growing portfolio of cinemas. However, each cinema was owned by a separate company which explains why many commentators have concluded that 'singleton' cinemas predominated in the south Wales valleys.<sup>63</sup>

Although part of a business circuit, these cinemas certainly had a strong local presence. As we have seen most directors and shareholders were local. Also, as it became clear to company directors that running a cinema was not a straight-forward business and that profits did not simply fall into their laps, many leased their venues to theatrical 'old hands' or brought in an experienced front-of-house manager. These front-of-house managers were generally well-known characters in their local communities. Many had worked in theatre and displayed a flamboyant management style. For example, Clarke's the Man, was the effervescent front-of-house manager for a number of cinemas in the Merthyr Cinemas Circuit. Figure 14 shows an advertisement for one of the cinemas he managed, the Park Cinema, Ponytpool.

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<sup>61</sup> BT31/20734/122603, Board of Trade papers, the National Archives.

<sup>62</sup> BT31/21599/130105, Board of Trade papers, the National Archives.

<sup>63</sup> For example, Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*.

Similarly, Victor Knowles, ‘the highly esteemed manager’ of the Hanbury Cinema, Bargoed had a long and colourful career in the theatrical world before he ‘went to the pictures’. In a biography, the local newspaper describes how he ‘toured the east, including Gibraltar, Malta, Egypt, Cairo, Khartoum, and numerous other places for a considerable period’ and that ‘his experiences in the East would fill a good sized volume and prove very interesting reading’. The biography closes by saying that in addition to his numerous other duties at the Hanbury cinema, Mr Knowles sings every night and by special request at children’s matinees and ‘deserves the considerable popularity he enjoys of his patrons, renters and other exhibitors’.<sup>64</sup>

Figure 14 If it’s Pictures – Clarke’s the Man! (Source: Courtesy of Phillip Wakely)



There was a strong economic impetus for the consolidation of cinemas and the business model had already been tried and tested by the precursor theatre circuits.

Associated Electric Theatres’ prospectus spells out the financial advantages:

*carrying on several theatres under the same management reduces the cost of management materially and by reason of the great saving in the arrangements made for hiring of picture films, renders a complete change of*

<sup>64</sup> Monmouth Guardian, 8<sup>th</sup> August, 1918.

*programme twice weekly thus opening an inducement to the members of the public to pay more than one visit to the theatre each week.*<sup>65</sup>

The dominance of local cinema ownership, and the relative ease with which it consolidated and extended its reach over a relatively short period of time is largely a consequence of the growing strength of middle class networks in the south Wales valleys. In these small close-knit communities there was often considerable overlap of business and family connections and interests. For example, George Kenshole, an architect who lived at Hengoed near Bargoed, was one of the businessmen behind the development of the Palace Cinema, the first purpose-built cinema in Bargoed. When it opened in 1910, the cinema, which Kenshole designed, was described by a local newspaper as having an ‘unrivalled front elevation’, easily surpassing in structure and design a similar theatre in Pontypridd.<sup>66</sup> George Kenshole was well connected locally. His father, Emmanuel Kenshole, had been deputy high bailiff of Aberdare and his brother Charles Kenshole was solicitor to the South Wales and Monmouthshire Coal Owners’ Association and later became High Constable of Merthyr, registrar of Merthyr County Court and Chairman of Aberdare Tribunal. George Kenshole was the architect for many local building projects including Bargoed police court and St Gwladys’ Church Hall and, according to the local newspaper, it was under his supervision that ‘practically the whole of Aberbargoed had been built’.<sup>67</sup> He was related by marriage to A. Iowerth Clark, a Bargoed-based accountant who acted as secretary to the Bargoed New Electric Theatre Co Ltd., the company that developed the Palace Cinema. Clark was an enthusiastic ‘civic booster’, or as the local newspaper described him, an ‘esteemed townsman’ and was involved with a variety of community causes including Bargoed and District AFC, the War Savings Committee, Bargoed and District Belgian Refugee Committee, Our Blind Soldiers and Sailors and Bargoed’s Annual Sports Day.<sup>68</sup> He was as enterprising as he was community-minded. He personally lent money, advertising mortgages at 5% on £100

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<sup>65</sup> BT31/19440/109321 and BT34/3561/109321, Board of Trade papers, the National Archives.

<sup>66</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 6<sup>th</sup> October 1910.

<sup>67</sup> *Monmouth Guardian*, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1914.

<sup>68</sup> Clark was secretary of Bargoed and District AFC, a limited liability company incorporated in 1919, *Monmouth Guardian*, 25<sup>th</sup> July 1919; War Savings Committee organiser for Bargoed, *Monmouth Guardian*, 6<sup>th</sup> September 1918; secretary of the Bargoed and District Belgian Refugee Committee, *Monmouth Guardian*, 12<sup>th</sup> October 1917; secretary of the Our Blind Soldiers and Sailors, a voluntary organisation that Jackson-Withers was also involved with, *Monmouth Guardian*, 17<sup>th</sup> November 1916; and sports secretary in 1910, *Merthyr Express*, 17<sup>th</sup> September 1910.

to £1000 in the local press,<sup>69</sup> he was the ‘genial and capable secretary’ of the Rhymney Valley Permanent Thrift and Loan Society,<sup>70</sup> was involved with a venture to develop a ‘model lodging house’ at Pontlottyn<sup>71</sup> as well as being associated with a number of early cinemas. His membership of the Bargoed Chamber of Trade and the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes (at the time one of largest fraternal organisations in the UK)<sup>72</sup> would almost certainly have oiled the wheels of business association.

Similarly, Henry Seymour Berry, who developed one of the first purpose built cinemas in Merthyr, had important family and business connections. His father owned an auctioneering business and was a long standing member of Merthyr Tydfil Urban District Council, becoming an alderman in 1908 and the Mayor of the town in 1911. On his election as mayor, the *Merthyr Express* reported that Alderman Berry was also a magistrate, a church deacon, a past Master of the Loyal Cambrian Lodge of Freemasons and ex-president of the local Chamber of Trade.<sup>73</sup> Henry Seymour Berry’s two brothers became major national newspaper proprietors.

The cultivation of professional and family connections in pursuit of business interests was not viewed as cronyism but as the legitimate pursuit of entrepreneurial opportunities that would ultimately benefit the whole local community. The same year that George Kenshole opened the Bargoed Electric Theatre, he designed and oversaw the development of Bargoed police court and both were celebrated locally as important civic embellishments, the chairman of Bargoed Chamber of Trade describing them as two palaces, ‘the palace of justice being built on Hanbury Road and the palace of pleasure being put up in the High Street, two unmistakable signs that Bargoed is progressing’.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, when Henry Seymour Berry’s father, Mayor Berry, opened the Merthyr Palace Cinema in June 1912 he made much of the local connections of the directors and shareholders asserting that ‘the Palace might be regarded as a new industry, in so much as all the money taken there would be kept in

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<sup>69</sup> *Monmouth Guardian*, 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1915.

<sup>70</sup> *Monmouth Guardian*, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1915.

<sup>71</sup> *Monmouth Guardian*, 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1914.

<sup>72</sup> Clark chaired the order’s annual meeting in 1916, *Monmouth Guardian*, February 4<sup>th</sup> 1916.

<sup>73</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 11<sup>th</sup> November 1911

<sup>74</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 20<sup>th</sup> October 1910.

the town'.<sup>75</sup> However, this is not to say that there were not ambiguities and tensions in the relationships between entrepreneurs and other interest groups. We shall see in Chapter Six that an unwritten business morality code pervaded and entrepreneurs, including cinema owners, needed to be sensitive to the complex interplay of local interests if they were to retain the support of the local community.

### **Entertaining as well as educating – the role of working men's institutions**

Public halls and working men's institutes together accounted for at least a third of all pre-1920 film venues and consequently had a major impact on the cinema going experience in the south Wales valleys. In some cases these halls and theatres were leased out to the theatre/cinema proprietors described above but it was also common for public hall/institute officials to run entertainment ventures themselves. For example, when Chas Poole withdrew from the lease of the Grand Theatre, Aberaman in 1915, the managing committee took over the business themselves, employing a manager and moving to continuous picture shows 'which is quite an innovation locally'.<sup>76</sup> Some commentators have argued that this incursion into the world of commercial entertainment provision was new and in some cases controversial given that the primary objective of these organisations was to educate and improve their members.<sup>77</sup> However, the public halls established in many south Wales valleys towns in the late 1800s had already set a precedent for blending social and commercial objectives and blurring the boundaries between public and private ownership. Most of the public halls developed in the late 1800s were in fact privately owned but their objectives often suggested wider community objectives. For example, Abercarn Public Hall Co Ltd, established in 1887, aimed to:

*provide at Abercarn a hall and other suitable rooms, buildings and places...for any purposes, public or private, and in particular for public meetings, exhibitions, concerts, lectures, dinners, theatrical performances and other entertainments and as a voluntary drill hall and for*

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<sup>75</sup> *Merthyr Express*, June 29<sup>th</sup> 1912. There had been much discussion by Merthyr Tydfil UDC of the need to attract new industries to the area and it appears that Mayor Berry is referencing this debate.

<sup>76</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 19<sup>th</sup> June 1915.

<sup>77</sup> For example, Berry, *Wales and Cinema*; Bert Hogenkamp, 'Miners' cinemas in South Wales in the 1920s and 1930s', *Llafur*, 4 (2), (1985), pp. 64-76; Stephen Ridgwell, 'South Wales and the cinema in the 1930s', *Welsh History Review*, 17 (4), (1993), pp. 590-675; Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*.

*reading, writing and newspaper rooms, libraries, baths, laundries, refreshment rooms, dressing rooms, shops, masonic, benefit or social clubs, business offices and residences.*<sup>78</sup>

The intention was for these halls to be a community resource but company directors were also keen to turn in a profit. A leaflet published in 1894 advertising the Blaina public hall to potential renters demonstrates how commercially astute directors could be. The leaflet emphasises the halls facilities – ‘a stage 30ft by 19ft with top and footlights, two dressing rooms, a private entrance from the street, well ventilated (and warmed when required)’ and also its money-making potential – ‘[it is] situated in the centre of extensive collieries, tin plate and iron works. There is £15,000 wages paid during every fortnight’. Rental charges are structured around colliers’ pay night (every other Saturday) with the most expensive rental night being Saturday pay night (£3), the intermediate Saturday night and Monday and Wednesday nights following colliers pay day were the next expensive at £2 per night whilst all other nights were £1. Charges were made for all extras such as the grand piano (5s for each performance and 2s 6d for each rehearsal), gas which was charged per meter and tea making facilities including copper boiler, boards and trestles.<sup>79</sup>

When a new generation of working-men’s institutes were built in the early 1900s, the precedents of using ‘public’ halls for entertainment purposes and leasing out halls to private companies were already well established. Some of these institutions provided high quality, commodious accommodation. For example, the Grand Theatre at Aberaman, which had been leased initially by Jackson-Withers and then by Chas Poole, consisted of the upper floor of a newly built Working Men’s Institute. When it opened in 1909, the theatre was described as having ‘seating accommodation for 1,450 persons, and there is not a seat in the building that does not command a complete view of the stage. The theatre is lit throughout with electric light and gas, the former at present being supplied by the Aberaman Co-operative Society, but the Powell Duffryn Company have generously undertaken to lay down an electric plant shortly wherewith to light the whole of the building’. As well as the upper storey which was used as a public hall and theatre, the ground floor consisted of ‘a lesser hall with seating accommodation for 300, a reading-room, a reference library, a

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<sup>78</sup> BT31/3858/24319, Board of Trade papers, the National Archives.

<sup>79</sup> BT31/2730/14781, Board of Trade papers, the National Archives.

lending library, which is already well filled with books, a ladies' reading-room and library. Below are a swimming bath, 50 feet long, plunge baths, shower baths, together with a number of committee-rooms, billiard- rooms, boys' billiard-rooms, game rooms, and committee-rooms'.<sup>80</sup>

Although not all working-men's institutes could boast such well-appointed facilities, it was common for them to host a wide range of activities from the political to the playful. When Keir Hardie opened the Aberaman Institute in 1909 he acknowledged this diversity of function, noting that 'the Institute had already secured in the hall a course of Gilchrist lectures, and they had also during the past six months had an exhibition of the drama, the opera, and variety entertainments, which he submitted were doing much to broaden life and in the library below they were providing for the intellectual and moral improvement of the people (Hear, hear.)'.<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, from 1910 onwards cinema became increasingly important to the financial well-being of many working men's institutes. Robert James has argued that cinema represented 'a very profitable enterprise' for many south Wales miners' institutes and kept many institutes afloat financially.<sup>82</sup> The explanation of the importance of the cinema side of the business given at the annual general meeting of the Brynaman Public Hall and Library in January 1915 could apply to many working men's institutes:-

*The institution is at present passing through a crisis, and it behoves the public to put their shoulders to the wheel, and give their unflinching support to the institution in all ways. Thus only can the doors be kept open. The Committee has had to undertake a cinema business to keep the place going, and in order to retain the use of the hall for the local public. Considerable risks have to be taken, but with public support the gulf can easily be bridged. Members' contributions are quite an insignificant part of the income, and it is to be hoped that scores of new members will enroll at once, at the beginning of the new year.*<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 26<sup>th</sup> December 1908.

<sup>81</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 19<sup>th</sup> June, 1909.

<sup>82</sup> Robert James, 'A very profitable enterprise: South Wales Miners' Institute Cinemas in the 1930s', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 27:1, pp. 27-61.

<sup>83</sup> *Llais Llafur*, 30<sup>th</sup> January 1915.



In order to run a successful cinema business, institutes had to be commercially minded and ‘highly responsive to their audiences’ needs and desires’.<sup>84</sup> Although there were occasional skirmishes over the priority that should be given to cinema over other institute activities and over the balance that should be struck between educational and commercial films, there was a growing acceptance that an overly didactic approach was unlikely to be rewarded and that it was important to respond to popular demand. James’ analysis of the 1937-1939 cinema ledgers of Cwmllynfell Miners’ Welfare Hall shows that almost all the films shown were produced for a commercial market, although American produced films were not quite as dominant as sometimes assumed, accounting for around two-thirds of all films shown.<sup>85</sup> To realise the financial benefits for their institutes, cinema committees had to negotiate with rental companies for the best films at the best prices, keep a weather eye on the opposition and, above all, know and respond to local audience preferences. The opening of another cinema locally represented a major threat to an institute’s financial viability and, as we shall see in Chapter Seven, it was common for such proposals to be vehemently opposed.

Workmen’s Institutes occupied an inherently ambiguous position, straddling as they often did both private and public sectors. Although some of their operations, in particular cinema, were clearly commercial, most other activities were conducted on a not-for-profit basis in line with Institute objectives to provide political, educational and recreational facilities for local working men and communities. This ambiguity did occasionally erupt into tensions as the dispute between Brynaman Public Hall and Library and Aberdare UDC illustrates. The council’s proposal in 1915 to assess the public hall and library for rates and taxes met with strong opposition. At a well-attended protest meeting, committee members argued that if it had not been for ‘a private company opening a cinema in opposition... there would have been no proposal to assess the public hall’ and that ‘taxation would place a premium on education and progress’ and that it would be difficult for the institute to remain open. It was agreed that they would fight their case for exemption and wanted ‘nothing of

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<sup>84</sup> Robert James, ‘A very profitable enterprise: South Wales Miners’ Institute Cinemas in the 1930s, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 27:1, pp. 27-61.

<sup>85</sup> Robert James, ‘A very profitable enterprise: South Wales Miners’ Institute Cinemas in the 1930s, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 27:1, pp. 27-61.

this dividend spirit in their transactions'.<sup>86</sup> In spite of the occasional out-break of opposition to commercialization, prevailing attitudes were generally supportive of private enterprise and, as we have seen, much 'public' entertainment provision was run on commercial lines.

### **'Let the field be open, free and fair for everyone'**

The cinema industry was highly competitive from its very earliest days. Many theatres, public halls and working men's institutes had for a number of years been showing films alongside more traditional entertainment forms and resented the entry of dedicated film venues to an increasingly crowded leisure market. For example, when the Palace cinema opened opposite the New Hall theatre in 1910 the *Bargoed Journal* commented on the blatant rivalry between the two establishments, personified in the 'rival managers calling the virtues of their respective Palaces' and as a consequence 'the public aren't quite sure where to turn'. The newspaper concluded that since both houses provide 'excellent shows, when things have found their normal course they will find that there is no necessity for such keen competition'.<sup>87</sup> Jackson-Withers was not so sanguine. Within a couple of weeks of the Palace opening, at no extra charge to its customers, the New Hall began showing pictures each evening before the main stage entertainment commenced.<sup>88</sup> The two venues also engaged in a price war. When the Palace first opened, seats cost 2s and 1s, but just two months later the cinema's management was compelled to significantly reduce prices to 1s, 6d and 3d in response to the New Hall's price reductions which included half price tickets for those visiting the theatre after 9pm.<sup>89</sup>

As previously stated, many working-men's institutes, for whom film exhibition was a lucrative income source,<sup>90</sup> doggedly resisted the setting up of commercial cinemas in their locality. For example, in July 1913 Aberaman Institute called a mass meeting to protest against 'the erection by a private syndicate of a new

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<sup>86</sup> *Llais Llafur*, 28<sup>th</sup> August 1915.

<sup>87</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 17<sup>th</sup> November 1910.

<sup>88</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 1910.

<sup>89</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 5<sup>th</sup> January 1911.

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, Robert James, "'A Very Profitable Enterprise': South Wales Miners' Institute Cinemas in the 1930s", *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 27, 2007, pp. 27-61.

cinema on a site opposite the Workmen's Institute in Cardiff Road'. The Institute had operated a theatre/cinema since it opened in 1909; in fact Jackson-Withers was the first leasee, running the theatre for just over a year until March 1910 when the lease was transferred to another theatre entrepreneur Chas Poole. At the mass meeting, the Chairman explained that although he was a 'believer in Free Trade and fair play' and understood that 'a little opposition sometimes proved helpful', he was vehemently opposed to 'some alien cinema-monger' whose object was 'not the good of the people but to make money'. Another committee member considered it 'cheeky and impertinent for people to come and place a building right opposite their own in that way'. The Institute 'belonged to the miners, it was theirs as a community, for the benefit of themselves, their children and the inhabitants of the neighborhood generally'. Although the institute theatre was leased to a commercial operation, the introduction of local competition would mean they would not get the same terms for the lease thereby reducing the Institute's funding. Some of those present opposed this protectionist stance, arguing that it was 'narrow minded' and that both venues 'could run together beautifully and without detriment to each other'. The Institute passed two resolutions, one opposing the passing of the cinema's building plans and the other opposing the granting of a cinematograph license.<sup>91</sup> Although a number of councillors on Aberdare UDC were sympathetic to the Institute's plight, they granted the necessary building permissions and exhibition licenses. The local newspaper reasoned that local demand could support both enterprises since 'the new cinema will confine itself entirely to pictures and will not, like the hall opposite, give any turns. So really the competition between the two places ought not to be very keen'.<sup>92</sup> In the event, the Institute had a more settled future than the commercial cinema. Aberaman Cinemas Ltd was dissolved in 1922 whilst the Aberaman Institute continued to show films until it was destroyed by fire in 1994.

Other working men's institutes voted to tolerate commercial competition. For example, in Abercynon, when two new commercial ventures, the Empire Theatre and Palace cinema, applied for cinematograph licenses in September 1913, Abercynon Hall and Institute which had 'catered for the people' since 1905 was initially hostile. The committee wrote to Mountain Ash UDC to say that the Institute had cost £13,000

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<sup>91</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 1<sup>st</sup> August 1913.

<sup>92</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 30<sup>th</sup> August 1913.

to build and running costs were £500 a year. 'It was too bad for outside people to come in now. The hall has a seating capacity of 2000 and the needs of the district are fully met'. The proprietors of the Empire and Palace argued that a 'section of the population were claiming a monopoly on the whole district'. By refusing the licenses the council would be 'killing private enterprise'. However, the council voted eight votes to five to support the Institute and refused the licenses.<sup>93</sup> The council continued to refuse the license applications for some five months until Abercynon workmen voted 257 votes to 37 to 'cease opposing the new cinemas and that the committee run shows equal to those of their opponents'.<sup>94</sup> In spite of the clear support of the workmen for granting the licenses, the debate at the council meeting was vigorous with some councillors arguing that 'if there was any advantage to be gained out of the pictures shown, the workmen ought have it'. Others expressed surprise that the Institute committee had wanted to create a monopoly situation. 'Workmen were always against monopolies, syndicates and combines. It was a very unjust thing to shut out these new places. Let the field be open, free and fair for everyone'. The council voted eight votes to five to grant the licenses, a reversal of the previous voting position.<sup>95</sup> However, less than two years later, in November 1914, Abercynon Palace Ltd went into voluntary liquidation.<sup>96</sup>

## Conclusion

Although leisure had been commercialised since as early as the mid 1700s, cinema was the first entertainment medium to be mass-produced and distributed. As a consequence of its 'mass culture' status, many commentators have associated commercial cinema with big business. However, in the early days this mass market was the result of the independent activity of hundreds of small entrepreneurs who responded to opportunities presented by the widespread production and distribution of film. We have seen in this chapter how theatre proprietors, local businessmen and working men's institutes jockeyed competitively for position in a rapidly expanding market. This decentralized activity built on well-established social and economic

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<sup>93</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 13<sup>th</sup> September 1913

<sup>94</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 24<sup>th</sup> January 1914.

<sup>95</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 14<sup>th</sup> February 1914.

<sup>96</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 13<sup>th</sup> November 1916.

patterns explains why cinema was assimilated so quickly and easily into the every day lives of south Wales valleys communities. Moreover, since it was a gradual process, it was possible to integrate notions of modernity with traditional social practices. Big business did come to dominate cinema exhibition in many areas of Britain and elsewhere, but it was small-scale enterprise that kick-started the industry and in south Wales, (although businesses did grow over the years) independent ownership continued to predominate.

We have also seen how the readiness to invest was part of a wider ‘investment culture’ of the late Victorian and early Edwardian period that pervaded many aspects of everyday life. On the whole companies were seen as agents of technological progress and economic advancement, acting in the public interest. Investment was believed to stimulate the local as well as the national economy and the locally based company promoters in the south Wales valleys made much of their enterprises’ wider community benefits. Indeed, Loftus has described how the social reform argument in favour of limited liability in the mid 1800s included a vision of ‘local communities tied together by capital investments, a potent example of mutual interests’.<sup>97</sup>

However, it is important not to overstate the extent to which the population of the south Wales valleys was caught up by this investment culture. Whilst the participation of working class people in the purchase of cinema company shares is somewhat unexpected, their numerical presence is fairly limited. Also, relatively quickly privately constituted companies replaced public companies, and shares were concentrated in the hands of a small number of directors. Further, the general support for enterprise was not without its contradictions and tensions. Although shareholding had become quite respectable, reckless speculation provoked moral condemnation.<sup>98</sup> As we shall see in Chapter Seven, a number of companies failed forfeiting their investors’ money and causing reputational damage to the fledgling industry.

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<sup>97</sup> Donna Loftus, ‘Limited Liability, Market Democracy and the Social Organisation of Production in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Britain’, in Nancy Henry and Cannon Schmitt (eds.) *New Perspectives on Finance and Culture* (Bloomington, 2009).

<sup>98</sup> See, for example, George Robb, *White Collar Crime in Modern England: Financial fraud and business morality 1845-1929* (Cambridge, 1992).

Given the moral quagmires that surrounded film and the wider commercialization of leisure, it is unsurprising that cinema entrepreneurs were adept social negotiators. Chapter Five describes the oppositional forces that were waged against cinema in the south Wales valleys and Chapter Six the considerable lengths that cinema entrepreneurs went to in order to embed themselves locally and to align their own business interests with those of the wider community.

## Chapter Five

### The ‘mainland of modernity’ or ‘devil’s instrument?’: Cinema as a site for community conflict and cohesion, 1910-1920.

*Ah, that the voice of God would thunder from the heavens and quake through the beings of the people! He passed public houses, the shed where silly pictures were displayed upon a sheet, fried-fish shops, big squat chapels of firm stone, and houses, houses, that were as tombs of the dead. And his voice trembled for utterance, he wanted to cry of the glory that was not in the lives of the people about him.*

Rhys Davies, *The Withered Root* (1927)

One of Jackson-Withers’ first brushes with local ‘disciplining forces’<sup>1</sup> occurred shortly after he opened the New Hall Theatre in Bargoed. In January 1908, Gelligaer Rural District Council had been ‘caught napping’ and granted a full dramatic license to the theatre and ‘innocently did so without restriction’.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence the theatre could and did sell alcohol. When the license came up for renewal a year later, Jackson-Withers applied for the same type of license arguing that he was no ordinary publican, drinking in his theatre was moderate and that the theatre kept people away from public houses. However, the local Free Church Council vehemently disagreed, and lobbied the council for the license to be refused. There was some support for Jackson-Withers on the council. The Reverend T Rees, Vicar of Pontlottyn, for example, said he did not want to be narrow-minded and was willing for a man to have a glass of beer and so supported the application. In the event, mindful of their previous error, the council granted the license, but exclusive of the sale of alcohol.<sup>3</sup> The local reaction was swift. Letters were published in the *Bargoed Journal* supporting the theatre’s position. One ‘teetotaller for 13 years’, who visited the theatre every week and had never seen any trouble, wrote that ‘it is a place where friend can meet friend without being tormented by the loafer and the sponger’.<sup>4</sup> Two weeks later a ‘life abstainer’ wrote that ‘we so called temperance fanatics are not the narrow minded creatures that many would believe... The theatre is an educative force

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase, ‘disciplining forces’ is coined by Biltreyst, Maltby and Meers (eds.) in *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: New perspectives on European cinema history* (London and New York, 2012)

<sup>2</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 27<sup>th</sup> February 1908.

<sup>3</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 28<sup>th</sup> January 1909.

<sup>4</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 4<sup>th</sup> February 1909.

and opposition to it comes from publicans who will lose a few shillings'.<sup>5</sup> A petition from town-people supporting a full license was presented to the council but a motion to rescind the previous decision was defeated. After several months of animated discussion the license was eventually reinstated subject to the theatre bar being cleared ten minutes before the last curtain fell. As one councilor remarked, 'we can't deny the poor collier his theatre and glass of beer', especially since they [the councillors] enjoyed the theatre when they visited London.<sup>6</sup> Possibly to underline its opposition to immoderate drinking, the following week the theatre ran a play entitled *Ruined by Drink*.

Whilst this episode relates to the sale of alcohol, it highlights many of the tensions that existed in relation to commercial leisure. On the one hand, the theatre/cinema was seen as an educative and civilising addition to town life, a morally superior option to 'loafing' about the streets or propping up a public house bar. On the other hand, in contrast to the worlds of work and religion, which were rule bound and hierarchical, commercial leisure provided a space where people could exercise a much higher degree of personal freedom with all risks that posed for civic misbehaviour. Many church and chapel leaders were increasingly uneasy about the growing secularization of south Wales society, believing that the cinema was supplanting the chapel/church as the principle institution of valleys towns. Although the majority of the civic elite – and the wider community – were generally supportive of cinema, there were pockets of intense opposition, mostly Non-conformist, and on certain touchstone issues such as children's exposure to cinema and the showing of films on Sunday, even moderates could be persuaded to take an oppositional stand. These tensions were at their height during the early years of cinema up to c1920, although as we shall see in subsequent chapters, opposition to Sunday opening was to persist in Wales until the late 1950s.

This chapter examines how cinema was received by influential factions within south Wales valleys communities, including government sponsored bodies such as local authorities and magistrates courts and non-state interest groups such as Non-conformist chapels and working men's institutes. It uses the case studies of children's

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<sup>5</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 18<sup>h</sup> February 1909.

<sup>6</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 11<sup>h</sup> September 1909.



access to cinema and Sunday opening to explore how tensions surrounding cinema were negotiated on a daily basis within the context of an increasingly complex regulatory system. Once again, Bargoed is the primary backdrop and Gelligaer UDC the arena for much of the discussion of cinema-related issues, although evidence is also drawn from other south Wales valley locations as a check on representativeness and to broaden the evidential base. Whilst Miskell's social history of cinema in Wales includes several useful chapters on critical responses to cinema, including methods of censorship, the aim of this chapter is to look more closely at the local dynamics involved.<sup>7</sup> It examines how regulatory authorities chose to interpret the regulations, the loop-holes employed by cinemas to circumvent the most business-damaging restrictions, the nature of religious opposition, how opinion divided by factors such as class and political affiliation and what considerations tended to sway local decision-making.

### **Cautious handshake or warm embrace –the early responses of civic leaders**

By and large the response to Jackson-Withers opening a theatre in Bargoed was positive. As we have seen in Chapter Three, by the early 1900s theatres had a more respectable public image and so the addition of a new theatre was a significant civic embellishment. When the New Hall Theatre opened in 1908, the *Bargoed Journal* described it as 'a fine pile of buildings' and congratulated the proprietor on 'providing first class amusements for the growing population of Bargoed and district, the centre of the great mining fraternity of the Rhymney Valley'.<sup>8</sup> The newspaper was eager to emphasize the metropolitan quality of the entertainment on offer – for example, 'plays staged at leading theatres in Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and Cardiff were coming direct to Bargoed';<sup>9</sup> soon 'the hallmark of a good company will be "from the New Hall, Bargoed"';<sup>10</sup> and 'we are getting more like London everyday'.<sup>11</sup> When an operetta, *Wreck of the Argosy*, was shown at the New Hall, the *Bargoed Journal*

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<sup>7</sup> Part 111 of Miskell's book is on Responses to Film-Going in Wales, and includes sections on Critics and Censorship and Control, Peter Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits; a social history of the cinema in Wales, 1918-1951* (Cardiff, 2006), pp.129-182.

<sup>8</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 6<sup>th</sup> February 1908.

<sup>9</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 20<sup>th</sup> February 1908.

<sup>10</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1911.

<sup>11</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 20<sup>th</sup> August 1908.

reported that ‘the audience was above the average. It was an audience able to appreciate music which is more than can be said for many audiences’.<sup>12</sup> When the first cinema, the Palace, opened in November 1909, the paper described it as a ‘marble palace’ with an ‘unrivalled front elevation’, ‘another building to add to the status of Bargoed’.<sup>13</sup>

A poem printed on the front page of the *Bargoed Journal* in 1911, following the installation of a town clock, hints at the level of local excitement at the town’s growing modernity:-

*Bargoed is now a place of renown  
In this valley – the most flourishing flower  
A place which supplies both mansion and home  
A thoroughly up to date little spot*

*It can now show a Palace and a Hall  
A four faced clock looking down upon all  
With tones of power marking each hour  
From the elevated place within the tower*

*Then we have both motor bikes and cars  
Electric lights shine on us, bright as stars  
And soon we may hail the trams upon rails  
Then we’ll have London upon a small scale*

*Yet Bargoed was just a village in the past  
With but a few inhabitants, no population vast  
No busy hive of industry such as its grown to be  
But a place of quietude and rest, quite the opposite you see.<sup>14</sup>*

The warm reception granted cinema entrepreneurs is not entirely surprising since, as we have seen in Chapter Four, most would already have been known to the civic elite, indeed many directors of cinema companies circulated in the same social and business circles. Further, a theatre or cinema had the capacity to pull people into the town from the surrounding countryside, and from neighbouring towns that were not similarly endowed in terms of commercial entertainment opportunities. This

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<sup>12</sup> The concert was given at the New Hall before it became the New Hall Theatre in February 1908. *Bargoed Journal*, 26th December 1907.

<sup>13</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 1909.

<sup>14</sup> This is an abbreviated version of the poem that appeared in the *Bargoed Journal*, May 11<sup>th</sup> 1911.

brought fringe benefits for other trades since once in town visitors were wont to spend their money.

In spite of the positive reception generally given to cinema, many civic leaders found themselves in an ambivalent position. They were at the centre of a new regulatory framework aimed at controlling film exhibition and, when the scope to use this framework to curb the activities of cinemas became better understood amongst oppositional groups, civic leaders found themselves the targets of often intense lobbying. The seminal piece of legislation was the 1909 Cinematograph Act which placed a range of safety requirements on commercially run cinemas and gave local authorities the power to inspect and license premises. Although the cinematograph industry generally welcomed the legislation, since it was in their interest to be seen as socially responsible, it became increasingly critical of the ways in which the law was being implemented; many local authorities were using their powers to attach additional (other than safety-related) conditions to licenses and cinema proprietors did not have any right to appeal if a license was refused or unreasonable conditions attached. The trade body, the Kinematograph Exhibitors' Association, reported:-

*Every year cinematograph licenses seem to have fresh conditions put upon them, although many such conditions have nothing whatever to do with the safety of the public.<sup>15</sup>*

*I think that it is most essential that one of these days, the earlier the better, the Cinematograph Act of 1909, should be amended so as to give Licensees a right of appeal against the decision of a Licensing Authority. When this Act was passed the industry was in its infancy, and I can hardly think that the draftsman when he drafted this Bill ever thought or intended Clause 2 of the Act to give such powers to the Licensing Authority as it does.<sup>16</sup>*

The 1909 Cinematograph Act was not the only control at the disposal of local authorities. It was common practice for silent films to be accompanied by live music, usually a pianist or orchestra, and this required a music and dancing license which, distinct from a cinematograph license, was usually granted by the magistrates' court rather than the local authority. A number of local authorities also used pre-existing legislation, such as public health acts, to impose additional conditions.

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<sup>15</sup> Kinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1939.

<sup>16</sup> Kinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1940.

The local implementation of these regulatory controls became the frontline between pro and anti-cinema lobby groups and civic leaders often found themselves in conflicted situations. Some issues, such as the local censorship of films, were relatively conflict-free. During the early years of cinema it was not unusual for local authorities to receive proposals for introducing local censorship arrangements, in spite of the introduction of a national scheme, the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) in 1913. One of the difficulties with the BBFC was that it had been set up by the industry because of concerns about increasing amounts of local censorship, but the anti-cinema lobby doubted its independence from the industry, believing it to be merely a cosmetic exercise.<sup>17</sup> Further, the BBFC issued only two certificates, U for universal and A for fit for public exhibition but more suitable for adults than for children. However, the A certificate was advisory only and did not de-bar children from attending, and there was no obligation on cinemas to show only films that had been certificated by the BBFC. In the face of what many saw as the inadequacies of a national censorship system, a number of requests were made to south Wales valleys authorities to introduce local arrangements. For example, a gathering of Non-conformists at Mountain Ash in May 1916 passed a resolution to seek ‘the appointment of a supervision board, representative of several bodies interested in the educative and moral development of juveniles, to exercise effectual censorship over all films exhibited in the amusement halls of the district as well as picture posters upon public hoardings’.<sup>18</sup> However, the great majority of authorities resisted these requests on the grounds that they were impracticable and that ‘films should be censored at source not in the districts where they are shown’.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Newport council was forced to retract a requirement that councillors should view *all* films in advance to them being shown publicly when the Home Office deemed the rule unrealistic.<sup>20</sup> Instead local authorities tended to issue letters to cinema proprietors asking them to exercise care in the films exhibited and reminding them that if they were to receive complaints these would be considered when their cinematograph license next came up for renewal. Cinemas were also regularly inspected and specific

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<sup>17</sup> Julian Petley, ‘Cinema and State’ in Charles Barr (ed.) *All our Yesterdays; 90 Years of British Cinema* (London, 1986), p. 41.

<sup>18</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 27<sup>th</sup> May 1916.

<sup>19</sup> Aberdare UDC meeting as reported in the *Aberdare Leader*, 28<sup>th</sup> April 1917.

<sup>20</sup> Kinematograph Exhibitors’ Association Year Book, 1918

visits were made when a complaint was received. For example, in 1919 Merthyr Tydfil's Chief Constable visited two local cinemas in response to complaints from a Mrs Hughes that cannibals in a film were not properly dressed. However, in a report to the local authority, the officer explained that he took no action since in his view 'in their respective spheres they were quite as respectable as many of the people frequenting certain drawing rooms in apparently good class society'. Also, 'the pictures are more instructive than otherwise. They are more educative than so called amusing pictures'.<sup>21</sup>

Other issues were far more divisive. It should be borne in mind that whilst the civic project was generally a unifying force, it was nevertheless riven with conflicting interests and tensions – political, economic, social and religious. The rise of the Labour Party in the early 1900s created greater political diversity on local councils,<sup>22</sup> and although the civic leadership was predominantly Non-conformist there were significant differences in the colour and strength of affiliation.<sup>23</sup> The presence of Non-conformist ministers on various licensing authorities, and the lobbying of authorities by anti-cinema bodies, inevitably had an impact on decision-making although, as we shall go on to see in relation to children and cinema and Sunday opening, there were frequent and ferocious debates on the issues and voting margins were often close.

### **'Too tainted for the young uns'**

The potentially negative effect of cinema on children was a widely shared concern, although only a minority of local authorities went as far as regulating children's access to cinema. It should be remembered that cinema very quickly became hugely popular with children due largely to its novelty, cheapness (as little as 2d and so affordable out of pocket money) and accessibility (continuous programmes meant that children could come and go as they pleased). On a wintry Saturday afternoon it provided an inviting alternative to idling away time at home or playing with friends in

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<sup>21</sup> *Llais Llafur* 15<sup>th</sup> November 1919.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Chris Williams, *Democratic Rhondda: Politics and Society 1885-1951* (Cardiff, 1996).

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, R. Tudor Jones, *Faith and the Crisis of a Nation: Wales 1890-1914* (Cardiff, 2004).

the cold streets. An inquiry into children and cinema reported that in urban areas, '90% of the elementary school population from eight to eleven years of age frequent this form of entertainment'.<sup>24</sup> The concern expressed by certain sections of the local community is to a large extent understandable since the mass attendance of cinema by children and young people represented a major social change and also early film programmes were an amalgam of every sort of entertainment, some more suitable for children than others. However, in some quarters the opposition to cinema was intense; many religious and educational bodies recoiled at the prospect of hordes of children gathering together in darkness to watch films they judged to be of dubious taste and character. The main dangers were perceived to be; educational (a 'dumbing down' of cultural values including a reduced incentive to read); moral (many films were of questionable quality and taste and could encourage degenerate behavior including criminal acts); and health related (eye-strain, lack of sleep from attending late evening shows and the risk of spreading infectious diseases). These risks were the subject of some considerable discussion at local and national levels. At national level, the National Council of Public Morals (a body of religious, scientific and educational leaders) was asked by the Cinematograph Trade Council in November 1916 to 'institute an independent inquiry into the physical, social, moral and educational influence of the cinema, with special reference to young people'. The Cinema Commission of Inquiry, which had the support of the Home Office, was led by the Lord Bishop of Birmingham and whose members included religious ministers, police officers, educationalists and cinema proprietors, reported exhaustively in 1917.<sup>25</sup> Although the 400 or so page report included some criticism, for example, of the 'excessive sensationalism and frightfulness of some of the film shown, and the wrong ideas of life and conduct suggested', it was by and large positive. For example;-

*Compelled as we were in our inquiry to give special attention to the alleged defects in the picture house, we have been convinced by the amount of testimony offered in its favour of its value as a cheap amusement for the masses, for parents as well as children, especially as regards its influence in decreasing hooliganism and as a counter-attraction to the public-*

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<sup>24</sup> *The Cinema: Its present position and future possibilities, being the report of and chief evidence taken by the Cinema Commission of Inquiry instituted by the National Council of Public Morals*, (London 1917), Section 11, p.ii.

<sup>25</sup> *The Cinema: Its present position and future possibilities, being the report of and chief evidence taken by the Cinema Commission of Inquiry instituted by the National Council of Public Morals*, (London 1917).

*house... we are strongly of the opinion that not only is improvement practicable, but also that it is of great national importance.*<sup>26</sup>

One of the Commission's recommendations was the introduction of state sponsored censorship (to replace the BBFC established by the cinema industry) and although the Home Office was initially amenable to the idea, the proposal was shelved shortly afterwards. The BBFC continued to be the national censor (in spite of its non statutory status) and local authorities increasingly adopted the BBFC's certificates as obligatory for their cinematograph licenses

The cinema industry welcomed the Commission's findings and could not resist pointing out that from its inception, 'the kinematograph business has been the object of the most slanderous attacks from all sorts of cranks' and the Commission's report included a 'complete refutation of many reckless charges hurled against The Industry.' However, the Kinematograph Exhibitors' Association (KEA) did concede that the industry had not 'come through entirely scathless – but any faults apply with equal force to "legitimate" theatre'.<sup>27</sup>

At the local level, the issue of children and cinema was the subject of debate in a variety of settings including the council chamber, chapel, magistrates' court and school. Cwmaman Girls' School held a debate in October 1915 entitled 'Is it a harmful practice to attend a cinema?' By a small majority the girls voted that it was *not* harmful, one speaker claiming that 'many an hour could be spent happily there while if sat in the house and brooded over your troubles you would become dull and miserable'. Also, 'one only spends three-pence or six-pence but when one goes to a certain sweet shop one spends a great deal more, in fact one could spend the whole of the Bank of England there!' Arguments against the cinema included, 'the windows and doors of cinemas [are] always closed and when the cinemas are full, people would be breathing in bad air which was poisonous. The men spat on the floors and the germs that caused consumption were spread about the place. Some pictures taught

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<sup>26</sup> *The Cinema: Its present position and future possibilities, being the report of and chief evidence taken by the Cinema Commission of Inquiry instituted by the National Council of Public Morals*, (London 1917). p. xivii.

<sup>27</sup> Kinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1918.

children to steal, and when bad pictures were shown they tried to imitate wicked things'.<sup>28</sup>

The stance taken by local authorities to the children and cinema issue varied. The majority (including Gelligaer UDC) was pragmatic, closing cinemas (and other public buildings) when epidemics raged and inspecting premises regularly to ensure they met safety and sanitary requirements. However, other local authorities had a more reforming agenda, usually driven by a small number of religiously motivated civic leaders. Indeed, Miskell has argued that the ardent championing of the issues of children's access to cinema and Sunday opening only occurred when religious groups realised that outright opposition to cinema was futile.<sup>29</sup> In 1914, the same year that William Haggar, the well-known Welsh film-maker and exhibitor, became a member of Aberdare UDC, the Council passed a resolution that under the Cinematograph Act 1909, commencing from April 1<sup>st</sup> 1914, 'no child under 14 years of age shall be permitted in any building to which a license has been granted during a public exhibition after the hour of 9pm'.<sup>30</sup> Three school attendance officers were responsible for inspecting cinemas to ensure they were compliant. However, the motion had been passed with only a small minority and the issue continued to ignite controversy over several years. For example, at the council's annual meeting in April 1916 there was a lengthy debate in response to a motion to once again use the authority's school attendance officers to enforce the regulations. Many objections were practical. At the meeting William Haggar said that 'as one of the much harassed proprietors of cinemas he wished to point out how impracticable the motion was. It was all very well to prevent children coming in after 9pm, but how were cinema owners or managers to turn them out at that hour? The cinema owners were most anxious to do everything they could to assist the council but the motion was not a practical one'.<sup>31</sup> Other concerns related to the cost of policing the regulations, the appropriate role of the state (as opposed to parental responsibility) and the underlying inequity in the regulations relating to cinemas and not other venues, such as churches and theatres, also attended by children. One councilor asked, 'do churches come under the same

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<sup>28</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 30<sup>th</sup> October 1915.

<sup>29</sup> Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*, p.174.

<sup>30</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 21 March 1914.

<sup>31</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1916.



rule because children are often kept there late singing cantatas etc.?' The motion was passed but only just and only after a lengthy and lively debate.

There was also widespread confusion over the most appropriate jurisdiction for the regulation of cinemas. By early 1917 Aberdare UDC had learnt (via a Home Office circular) that the Cinematograph Act 1909 could not be used to introduce blanket conditions on children's access to cinemas and that the most appropriate mechanism was the music and dancing licenses issued by Magistrates' courts. The Council lost no time in sending two delegates to Aberdare Police Court to request that even more stringent conditions were placed on cinemas via their music and dancing licenses (required for the live music accompanying silent films).<sup>32</sup> The conditions were:-

- No child under 14 to be allowed in places of amusement after 7pm unless accompanied by a parent or guardian
- No child to be allowed in a place of amusement after 9pm whether accompanied or not
- Power be granted to the police or to officials of the Education authority to inspect places of amusement

The matter was adjourned for a month since cinema proprietors had not been consulted, nor had the matter been discussed at Aberdare UDC's full council. When the Police Court reconvened in March, the three conditions were agreed to by a majority of magistrates and a request from cinema proprietors to compromise with an extension to 7.30pm and 9.30pm respectively was rejected.<sup>33</sup>

The decision created a storm of protest in the local press and amongst the general public, the measures viewed as both anti-working class and anti-children:-

*[the decision] savours strongly of a narrow bigoted spirit. The wives of well-to-do people have their maids and nursemaids to attend their children, whilst they (the wives) with their husbands go to parties, suppers, theatres and balls. Pity to the workmen's wives who have to attend to their household duties as well as nurse the children and have no alternative but to take their children*

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<sup>32</sup> *Aberdare Leader* 10 February 1917.

<sup>33</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 10th March 1917.

*with them to the cinema. We hear a great deal of the unenviable state of affairs under which we should live if Germany were victorious in this war. If the German autocratic spirit would inflict such blows on our individual liberty as these magistrates did last week, we can understand why Great Britain is prepared to fight until the last man and last shilling are gone rather than yield and live in subjection to the Central Powers.*

*As things are now the kiddies are curfewed from the kinema at 7pm unless tethered to the maternal apron-strings and at 9pm the place becomes too tainted for the young 'uns even in the custody of ma and pa. While ordering glass cages for the children it would be well to get iron cages for some children of a larger growth who are responsible for such childish enactments.<sup>34</sup>*

The *Aberdare Leader* encouraged the Abercynon workmen (whose Institute was also affected by the regulations) to 'prosecute the question to the High Court to see whether these conditions can be laid down.'<sup>35</sup> Some members of Mountain Ash UDC were also enraged since Aberdare Police Court's jurisdiction extended to Mountain Ash cinemas (and yet it was Mountain Ash UDC that issued cinematograph licenses). One member posed the question, 'surely Mountain Ash is as important as Aberdare?' to which the chairman replied, 'We are not as advanced as Aberdare but we are broader than them, I hope'.<sup>36</sup> The restrictions were described as the 'height of absurdity', 'why should Aberdare and Mountain Ash of all places in the county, and possibly the country, be subjected to these ridiculous conditions?' and a decision was taken to write to the Police Court to complain.

The conditions remained in place until at least 1919 and vividly illustrate the vulnerability of cinema proprietors to the vagaries of local decision making. Jackson-Withers was also affected by the approach adopted by Aberdare UDC since from around 1916 he was running the Abercynon Empire. He would also have been aware of his vulnerability should Gelligaer UDC adopt a similar position.

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<sup>34</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 17<sup>th</sup> March 1917.

<sup>35</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 7<sup>th</sup> July 1917.

<sup>36</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 24<sup>th</sup> March 1917.

## Sometimes on a Sunday

Such was the strength of non-conformist opposition to the showing of films on Sundays in Wales that it is often assumed that a comprehensive ban prevailed across the country until well into the 1950s, a *Never on Sunday* scenario. For example, Peter Miskell writes that ‘in almost the whole of Wales cinema were prevented from opening on Sundays until the 1950s’.<sup>37</sup> However, in the south Wales valleys, at least, the reality was rather different. Although the Sunday observance lobby in Wales was undeniably strong and succeeded in closing most cinemas on Sundays, the issue remained a contentious one. Pro and anti Sunday cinema interest groups continued to spar with each other in a long war of attrition, with hard fought concessions no sooner won than lost. Voting on seven-day licenses was often close and many councils ricocheted between allowing and disallowing Sunday opening. For example, Gelligaer UDC awarded seven-day licenses until 1912, six-day licenses for five years until 1917, seven-day licenses for five years until 1922, and then (apart from a 3 month period in 1932 when seven-day licenses were allowed) six-day licenses remained in force for thirty-six years until 1958.

Sunday observance, the commitment to keep the Lord’s Day holy and free from work and other secular activities, was a fundamental pillar of the Nonconformist faith that dominated the south Wales valleys.<sup>38</sup> The Sunday Observance Act 1780 had made it an offence for any premises to which the public paid for admission to be used for public entertainment or amusement on Sundays. As a consequence, ‘only the public house and chapel were open on the Welsh Sunday, and any attempts to provide rational counter-attractions to the public house were strenuously resisted by Sabbatarians’.<sup>39</sup> Drinking and drunkenness became increasingly problematic with the arrival in south Wales of a ‘large floating population of single men and lodgers freed from the restraints of a settled and responsible home’.<sup>40</sup> Churches and chapels were

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<sup>37</sup> Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*, p.158.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, D. Densil Morgan, *The Span of the Cross: Christian Religion and Society in Wales, 1914-2000* (Cardiff, 2011); R. Tudor Jones, *Faith and the Crisis of a Nation: Wales 1890-1914*, (Cardiff, 2004); Robert Pope, *Building Jerusalem: Nonconformity, Labour and the Social Question in Wales, 1906-1939* (Cardiff, 1998).

<sup>39</sup> W. R. Lambert, ‘The Welsh Sunday Closing Act, 1881,’ *Welsh History Review*, 6:2 (December 1972), p. 166.

<sup>40</sup> Lambert, ‘The Welsh Sunday Closing Act’, 1881, p.165

unanimous in their condemnation of drinking on the Sabbath and complaints of respectable church and chapel-goers having to run the gauntlet of drunk and disorderly crowds were common-place.

Opposition to Sunday drinking culminated in the Welsh Closing Act of 1881 that closed public houses on Sunday other than to bona-fide travellers. It is significant that this act was the first piece of Wales-specific legislation to be passed by Parliament since the union. For many, Sunday observance became a symbol of Wales' distinctive culture and identity at a time when the Anglicisation of large areas of south-east Wales was perceived to be diluting the essence of Welsh culture. The resistance to Sunday opening persisted for decades, in sharp contrast to the situation in England where Sunday film shows had become fairly commonplace by the 1920s. For example, in 1922 the trade body, the Kinematograph Exhibitors' Association, claimed the tide had changed with the London County council now 'in favour of universal licenses for all properly equipped places of entertainment' and that many other districts were following the way with seven-day licenses being granted with a charity clause.<sup>41</sup> A development guide for cinema theatres, published in 1930, proclaimed that:-

*Sabbatarianism is as dead as Queen Victoria, the deadest of all sovereigns. A certain abandon is possessing us; and the element of duty in our distractions and relaxations, other than sport, has largely disappeared. We no longer take our pleasures quite so seriously for we have discovered that life itself is an art, and neglect of it sours and impoverishes us... Pomposity of any kind is a welcome Aunt Sally's coconut for us to shy at.*<sup>42</sup>

In contrast, Sabbatarianism remained a live and potent force until the 1950s in Wales, although Wales was not entirely alone in this respect. Trevor Griffiths writes that in Scotland, Sunday observance had also acquired a wider significance, marking out Scotland as a 'distinct and separate polity'.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, Scotland introduced Sunday closing legislation in 1853, some thirty years before Wales.

Protection of the Sabbath was a touch stone issue that affected not only cinema but a wide range of activities including shopping, day-tripping, sport and

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<sup>41</sup> Kinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1922

<sup>42</sup> P. Morton Shand, *The Architecture of Pleasure: Modern Theatres and Cinemas* (London, 1930), p.1.

<sup>43</sup> Trevor Griffiths, *The Cinema and Cinema-going in Scotland, 1896-1950* (Edinburgh, 2013), p. 138.

secular meetings. For example, a *Bargoed Journal* editorial that appeared in April 1915 criticised people who played golf on Sunday, stating that ‘ladies and gentlemen are to be seen on Sundays indulging in the game of golf. If they saw a game of football on a Sunday they would be shocked, but what is the difference?’ The editor decried the ‘continental idea of Sunday’ and argued that ‘England or Great Britain should be the country to set an example’.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the newspaper railed against the Sunday opening of shops arguing, ‘we have closed the public houses on Sundays, we have closed the cinemas on Sundays, and now we must close the shops that are not actually required on Sundays’. Once again, non-locals were blamed for breaching the civic code. ‘We have allowed the foreigner unlimited liberty in the past, but if they desire to reap the benefit of the peace and security that we provide for them, they must respect our institutions and conform to our ideas. All the Churches, Chapels, steady going people and peaceful residents should join and “Close the Shops on Sundays”’.<sup>45</sup>



Figure 15 A bona fide traveller  
(Source: print in possession of author)

<sup>44</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 15<sup>th</sup> April 1915.

<sup>45</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 16<sup>th</sup> November 1916.

Almost every leisure activity was targeted for censure. On Barry Island, an application to the licensing committee by boats-men for permission to hire out their boats on Sundays brought immediate criticism. In a speech to a meeting of the Free Church Council in Barry in 1922, a councilor warned that Sunday boating would be ‘a kind of advance guard in the onward march that threatened Sunday worship’. Although he did not want people to ‘go about wearing long and dour faces’...’the charm of our seaside should not be turned into a playground on Sundays. The idea of Sunday as a day of worship is very old, and a very modern age like ours likes to lead its old things out to execution’.<sup>46</sup>

Secular meetings held on Sundays were also the subject of criticism. For example, Rhymney Valley Baptists passed a resolution in 1922 declaring their strongest opposition to ‘the custom that is increasing in our midst of holding secular meetings on the Lord’s Day’.<sup>47</sup> A number of working men’s institutes had voted to open on Sundays for workers’ meetings since ‘more men could attend on this day than any other’. For example, in April 1910 Nixon’s Workmen’s Hall and Institute at Mountain Ash resolved to open on Sundays for the purpose of holding workers’ meetings subject to an application being made to the Institute’s secretary.<sup>48</sup> In January 1928, miners’ Agent, A. J. Cook, was unapologetic when ‘keen disapproval was expressed in several quarters of Aberdare’ at him addressing over 5,000 workmen in a series of meetings. Addressing a meeting at Aberaman, he said that he made no apologies for coming to the district on a Sunday because he was speaking on behalf of the Miners’ Federation that ‘existed to raise the moral standard by fighting for economic security’. He had no regard for those people who said they were ‘abusing the Sabbath or desecrating it’. The Miners’ Federation had ‘done more to make it possible for men to be morally honest than religious organisations’.<sup>49</sup>

Although the Nonconformist campaign to preserve the Sabbath was not, therefore, targeted at cinema-going alone, popular leisure pursuits were perceived to have a particularly insidious impact. Andy Croll writes that although this type of

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<sup>46</sup> Notes for speech, Glamorgan Archives, reference BB/C/24/2.

<sup>47</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 8<sup>th</sup> April 1922.

<sup>48</sup> Nixon Workmen’s Institute, Mountain Ash, committee minutes 27<sup>th</sup> January 1910 to 5<sup>th</sup> April 1911, MNC/NUM/1/7/2, Richard Burton Archives, Swansea University

<sup>49</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 14<sup>th</sup> January 1928.

criticism was not new, the Nonconformist reaction had become particularly ferocious by the early 1900s in response to the heightened threats that commercialised leisure was perceived to present.<sup>50</sup> He outlines three main threats to Non-conformism posed by commercialised leisure. The first related to chapel attendance levels that had dwindled persistently since the religious revival of 1904-5 and were blamed by many on the counter-attractions of popular leisure. Secondly, Nonconformism had to respond to growing public resentment provoked by its inability to accommodate institutions such as cinema within its world view. Finally, religion was further marginalized by the incorporation of increasingly respectable commercial entertainments into the positive public image of south Wales valleys towns.

A number of commentators have suggested that another source of disapproval with cinema came from Welsh speaking circles critical of the perceived Americanization of Welsh culture.<sup>51</sup> However, this type of disapprobation was usually expressed at the national level and was much more rarely a feature of the debates and disagreements that abounded in the south Wales valleys.

In spite of strong feelings regarding Sunday observance, in most areas bioscope shows had been running for a number of years before opposition gathered pace. Initial tolerance may have been due to the fairly well established practice of holding sacred concerts on Sundays with any proceeds going to charitable causes. Jackson-Withers held his first sacred concert at the New Hall, Bargoed in November 1909. The concert was chaired by Cllr. W. B Lloyd, featured the Bargoed Male Voice choir and Bargoed Choral Society and donated its proceeds to Mr John Bevan, Bargoed who was preparing for the Ministry.<sup>52</sup> The *Bargoed Journal* reported that ‘there was a large audience which fully appreciated the efforts of the artistes’ and that it was the intention of Jackson-Withers to hold sacred concerts during winter months. The newspaper encouraged people to attend reasoning that the concerts took people

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<sup>50</sup> Croll, *Civilising the Urban*. Chapter VI Nonconformity and the Pursuit of Pleasure considers the difficult relationship between Nonconformists and leisure during the late Victorian and Edwardian periods.

<sup>51</sup> Miskell, for example, describes how the Welsh middle class responded to the cultural threat posed by cinema and argues that their calls for cinema to be used as a medium of national expression had their roots in the cultural nationalism of Liberal Wales, Peter Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*, pp. 142-152.

<sup>52</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 25<sup>th</sup> November 1909.

off the street, ‘hooligan types with their shouting and jostling and deliberate annoyance of females’. The concerts ‘provide a social service and should be commended’.<sup>53</sup> The newspaper also published a letter from a reader who wrote how much he had enjoyed the concert and that he endorsed what the chairman had said – that concerts of that class held more frequently on Sunday evenings would prove beneficial to the community. However, the reader believed that they should only be held in winter months as ‘in summer time outside is best side – to ramble around the attractive spots which abound in the district is far preferable to attending concerts after divine worship’. The reader suggested that ‘a combined committee of the leaders of choirs, bands, parties etc of our town could easily arrange for a sacred concert of about an hour’s duration every Sunday evening from October to March, and thereby, as it is done in other towns, provide a rendezvous with a moral and spiritual tone for the young folk who usually parade the main streets and roads after 8 o’clock on a Sunday’.<sup>54</sup>

This is not to say that sacred concerts went entirely unopposed. For example, in another letter to the *Bargoed Journal*, a reader argued that ‘These so called sacred concerts that are held on Sunday evenings at the New Hall, Bargoed... can in no way be called sacred, the word is merely used as a cloak to ward off criticism’. The letter-writer also threw in criticisms of Sunday trading and ‘boy scouts marching through the streets in football attire on the Sabbath’.<sup>55</sup>

The inclusion of the occasional short film into these ‘respectable’ programmes does not appear to have provoked very much reaction initially. Opinion began to turn, however, when film shows began to replace ‘sacred concerts’ as the dominant Sunday evening entertainment. Film exhibitions were an attractive option for theatres and working men’s institutes as once a cinematograph machine had been purchased overheads were relatively low, certainly much lower than engaging actors, singers and musicians. Although a number of religiously themed films were available for exhibition, some of the films included in Sunday film exhibitions undoubtedly fell below ‘chapel standards’ and in the run up to the First World War opposition had

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<sup>53</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1911.

<sup>54</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 20<sup>th</sup> May 1909.

<sup>55</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 29<sup>th</sup> October 1910.



gathered pace. One sacred concert goer in a letter to the local newspaper described how he saw the picture *Samson* and had to confess that whilst ‘it was an excellent example of the trueness of the Christians of the olden times when I then saw pictures which were of a comical nature I did not think that it was consistent with the previous one and my heart burned within me and my conscience proved my inconsistency’.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, another sacred concert goer wrote that ‘I felt the blood tingle in my ears and my heart beat loud when I saw that beautiful old song, *Oh God be with you till we meet again* by the choir and *Napoleon’s Game of Chess* by the bioscope classed together and directly following one another on the programme’. He ended the letter with the question, ‘Was this Christianity, sir?’<sup>57</sup>

In Bargoed, films had been shown at the New Hall Theatre on Sundays as part of a wider programme of entertainment since 1909, and when the Palace cinema opened opposite the New Hall theatre in 1910, it too hosted Sunday evening film exhibitions. Up until 1912, Gelligaer UDC had issued seven-day cinematograph licenses with seemingly few qualms. Indeed, in August 1912 when the Pontlottyn Free Church sent a delegation to the council to argue for the Sunday closure of theatres and cinemas, the Rector of Bargoed, the Reverend T. J Jones, supported seven day licenses since ‘coercion and prohibition have been tried in the past but now we are face to face with new circumstances. The temper of the age has changed and has become a temper that sought for pleasure’. The *Bargoed Journal*’s commentary on the council debate was entitled ‘Good for the Rector’ but the editor also speculated that the Rector may have opened himself up for criticism.<sup>58</sup>

However, as 1912 progressed there was gathering disquiet concerning Sunday film shows and in October, when a new cinema at Ystrad Mynach applied to Gelligaer UDC for a license, the Rector asked if the council had any power to limit cinema licenses to six days. The clerk responded that if they did so, cinemas could still open on Sundays if they used non-inflammable films since such film exhibitions fell outside the 1909 Cinematograph Act and no license was therefore required. The

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<sup>56</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1911.

<sup>57</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 20<sup>th</sup> August 1910.

<sup>58</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 8<sup>th</sup> August 1912.

council granted a seven-day license but resolved that ‘the question of rescinding all seven-day licenses to six-day licenses be considered at the earliest opportunity’.<sup>59</sup>

At the council’s December meeting the Rector moved a resolution that ‘this council decides to entertain no application for either granting or renewing seven day licenses for any places of public entertainment or amusement in its area’.<sup>60</sup> The resolution was narrowly passed, eight votes to seven. The Rector’s speech encapsulated some of the key arguments against Sunday opening that were in circulation at the time. He argued that although he did not believe in ‘coercing people to religious observance’ and was a supporter of ‘religious liberty’, he felt that in awarding seven-day licenses, the council was ‘somehow taking sides in this matter of giving facilities’. He had been approached by ‘serious minded men, many of them certainly not professing to be religious, but who take a sane view of the situation and have impressed upon me... that this council ought not be a party to grant such facilities’. He had heard that ‘cinemas are a source of great trouble to those who are eager for the welfare of our youths of the district’. He was also concerned with ‘the question of Sunday labour which was becoming more acute’. He argued that ‘in granting the facilities we are helping to pile on those who are engaged in this business a work which we would not undertake ourselves.’ He did not wish to be party to the motive of cinema owners which was one of ‘pecuniary advantage’.

The council hotly debated the issue, with those in favour of seven-day licenses highlighting the inconsistencies in the opposition’s arguments in relation to Sunday labour. ‘The colliers had to work seven nights and if they did not do so their families would go short’. Further, ‘for years and years there was a class of the community utilizing the Sabbath as they pleased and there was no organization protesting against religious observance’. In addition, cinemas got people off the streets. ‘The roads were blocked on Sundays until they got people into the Halls. They would see hundreds tramping down the street, pitter, patter’. One councillor ‘happened to be in Tredegar on Sunday night where there were no cinemas open and the street was filled with a great number of people marching back and fore aimlessly’. ‘Until the opposition

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<sup>59</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 5<sup>th</sup> October 1912.

<sup>60</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UD/G/C/1/6.

provided some means of dealing with the Sunday night walking back and fore, until they provided some Sunday concerts or other form of entertainment' he was going to support seven day licenses. 'It was not an infamous thing for people to be sitting down looking at innocent pictures. Some of them were not too elevating but there was nothing demoralizing about them'. Another councilor said he 'had not attended a single show where any vice or immorality was shown on the screen where retribution did not follow it'. He was not ashamed to take his wife and children there, and 'the pictures had a great instructive influence on the young and even old'. Until they proved that 'those people who attended the cinemas, that their conduct was dangerous to the moral tone of the community' they had 'no right to restrict them from seeking pleasure in their own way'.<sup>61</sup>

The vote in favour of the Rector's resolution marked a major shift in Gelligaer UDC's attitude to Sunday cinema. It seems that councillors found it difficult to reject a resolution that attached itself so explicitly to the principle of Sunday observance, albeit that the majority was slim. Also council members may have been demonstrating their personal support for the Rector who was known for his moderate stance on most social issues. Further, the Sabbatarian cause in the Gelligaer area had gained strength from the surge in opposition to Sunday film exhibitions that was occurring elsewhere in south Wales and further afield. Although the Cinematograph Act had been introduced some three years earlier in 1909, it took a while for the Non-conformist lobby to fully appreciate the potential impact of the regulatory powers bestowed on local authorities. A Court of Appeal decision in favour of local authorities attaching non-safety related conditions to licenses under s2 of the 1909 Act as long as those conditions were reasonable also emboldened the anti-cinema lobby.<sup>62</sup> Growing appreciation of the potential of the regulatory framework to control film exhibition, combined with heightened concerns at the proliferation of Sunday film shows, led to the intensive lobbying of regulatory authorities, in particular by the Free Church Council. Although there had been no religious delegation to the meeting at which Gelligaer UDC voted for six-day licenses, the council had received many such delegations in relation to the New Hall Theatre's license to sell intoxicating liquors and intensive lobbying had already closed cinemas on Sundays in many south Wales

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<sup>61</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 5<sup>th</sup> December 1912.

<sup>62</sup> *London County Council versus the Bermondsey Bioscope Co. Ltd.* (1910) iKB445 (Bioscope).

local authority areas. During 1911, Caerphilly, Mountain Ash, Barry, Rhondda and Pontypridd councils all voted to issue only six- day cinematograph licenses. The Federation of Evangelical Free Church Councils subsequently wrote to each council to say they ‘heartily supported’ the councils’ efforts to ‘maintain the sanctity of the Lord’s Day by refusing to grant seven-day licenses to halls, theatres and other places of amusement’.<sup>63</sup> In June 1912, having received a delegation from Merthyr and District Free Church Council, Merthyr Tydfil UDC followed suit.

Magistrates’ Courts in the south Wales valleys had also begun to attach Sunday bans to music and dancing licenses. For example, just a couple of months before Gelligaer UDC’s vote in favour of six-day licenses, Caerphilly magistrates refused a Sunday music and dancing license to the Palace cinema, Bargoed, the *Bargoed Journal* lamenting that ‘even the Bargoed cinema, the Palace, shall not be defiled by the sound of a piano on a Sunday. We remember a couple of very nice hymns being sung there one Sunday’.<sup>64</sup> It is interesting to note that Trevor Griffiths identifies a similar hardening of Sabbatarian sentiment in Scotland from around 1911.<sup>65</sup> The introduction of six-day licenses in Bargoed elicited an immediate response from the press. The *Bargoed Journal* reported that ‘this action on the part of the Rector has curtailed our freedom inasmuch as this prohibition denies us the opportunity of spending our Sunday evenings as we see fit... We have a vivid recollection of the aimless wanderings of our young people up and down our streets on Sunday evenings prior to the advent of the cinema. Some of us remember the horse play and hooliganism, the shouting and jostling in the streets, and gangs of boys and girls in shop doorways’. The editorial concluded by anticipating that the Rector would change his mind when he realized ‘the injustice that has been done to the collier, particularly those working at night’.<sup>66</sup>

The colliers clearly did object since within a week or so of the Council’s decision, the Powell Duffryn workmen passed a resolution disapproving of the Council’s action and wrote to the Council asking them to reconsider their decision.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 9<sup>th</sup> March 1911.

<sup>64</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1912.

<sup>65</sup> Trevor Griffiths, *The Cinema and Cinema-going in Scotland, 1896-1950* (Edinburgh, 2013), p.143.

<sup>66</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 5<sup>th</sup> December 1912.

<sup>67</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UD/G/C/1/6.

The expression of popular dissatisfaction with Sunday closing was not unusual. Following the council's refusal to grant Sunday licenses, Nixon workmen at Mountain Ash held a ballot on March 17<sup>th</sup> 1911 to vote on three resolutions relating to the Sunday opening of their Institute and Library. One of the resolutions that 'the hall be open for bioscope shows and Sunday concerts' received 1540 votes in favour, 854 votes against, giving a majority of 686. The majority was greater than for another resolution that 'the hall be open for preaching and lecturing' which received a majority of 559.<sup>68</sup> In spite of this mandate, the institute continued to experience problems securing seven-day licenses and held further ballots in 1915 and 1919. The 1915 ballot delivered a majority of 1,534 with 79% of workmen voting for Sunday opening,<sup>69</sup> in 1919 there was a majority of 3,171 with 80% voting in favour.<sup>70</sup> Similarly in Abercynon in 1914, 88% of workmen voted for Sunday opening and a 'long petition from rate-payers and householders' was also submitted to the local authority.<sup>71</sup>

Members of the public also expressed their dissatisfaction with Gelligaer UDC's decision via petitions and letters to the local press. The defence of Sunday opening took several lines. One of the strongest arguments was that cinemas took people off the streets and reduced Sunday drunkenness. A letter published in the *Merthyr Express* in 1912 typifies the argument:-

*These exhibitions do more to check Sunday drinking and empty public houses than do all the chapels put together. Our streets and roads are much quieter after chapel on a Sunday than before the advent of living pictures in our midst. Formerly our boys and girls and young people generally behaved in a manner not all together in keeping with the quiet and sanctity of the Sabbath.*<sup>72</sup>

The argument was a persuasive one as contraventions of the Welsh Sunday Closing Act 1881 were commonplace. W. R. Lambert has written that 'border smuggling, the opening of clubs and the abuse of the bona fide traveller clause of the

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<sup>68</sup> Nixon Workmen's Institute, Mountain Ash, committee minutes 27<sup>th</sup> January 1910 to 5<sup>th</sup> April 1911, MNC/NUM/1/7/2, Richard Burton Archives, Swansea University.

<sup>69</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 26<sup>th</sup> June 1915.

<sup>70</sup> Nixon Workmen's Institute, Mountain Ash, committee minutes 11<sup>th</sup> September 1917 to 26<sup>th</sup> May 1921, MNC/NUM/1/7/3, Richard Burton Archives, Swansea University.

<sup>71</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 14<sup>th</sup> February 1914.

<sup>72</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 16<sup>th</sup> March 1912.

Act were amongst the most popular forms of evasion of the Act'.<sup>73</sup> Evasion took a very specific form in Bargoed because of the exemption of Monmouthshire from the legislation until the end of World War One. Drinkers had only to cross the Rhymney river to Aberbargoed, less than a mile away, to legally purchase and consume alcohol. The small beer cask trade also grew significantly with publicans selling take-out beer on a Saturday for consumption on a Sunday. The impact of the 1881 Act is highlighted by the fact that at the three breweries of William Hancock and Company, the production of firkins (nine gallon casks) increased from 738 in 1881/2 to 12,475 in 1888/9, and that of pins (four and a half gallon casks) from 72 to 26,580 over the same period.<sup>74</sup> Private clubs supplying alcohol also proliferated. As long as clubs registered with the local authority and were properly constituted (including being able to prove they were not set up solely for the purpose of supplying intoxicating drinks to members) they could open on Sundays with impunity. Although cities experienced the greatest expansion in the number of private clubs or 'shebeens' (a census conducted by the *Western Mail* in 1889 found that there more than 480 clubs in Cardiff alone<sup>75</sup>), the considerable advantage of clubs being able to side-step the Sunday drinking rules incentivised their opening in many areas, including the south Wales valleys.

The clubs were widely criticized and police raids were commonplace. The *Bargoed Journal* wrote in 1912 that 'very few clubs have been able to stand the test of a searching investigation' and that 'if clubs are to be conducted in a bona fide manner the members must see to it that intelligent men and not illiterate men are put on the committee and that the chairman and secretaries are men of high moral standing'.<sup>76</sup> Many clubs were 'struck off' following a police raid. For example, the Imperial Workmen's Club, Pengam was prosecuted in 1912, the residing magistrate concluding that the club was 'nothing but a drinking den'.<sup>77</sup> Giving evidence, Inspector Canton reported that when he and a colleague had raided the club in September 1912 there were 15 men present in the bar as well as a talking parrot. Eight of the men were drunk and the remaining seven had not been properly elected to

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<sup>73</sup> Lambert, 'The Welsh Sunday Closing Act, 1881', p. 175.

<sup>74</sup> Lambert, 'The Welsh Sunday Closing Act, 1881', p. 176.

<sup>75</sup> Lambert, 'The Welsh Sunday Closing Act 1881', p. 178.

<sup>76</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 10<sup>th</sup> October 1912.

<sup>77</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 7<sup>th</sup> November 1912.

membership. The club which had only opened in July of that year had just two objects, the first was to provide ‘social intercourse, mutual helpfulness, mental and moral improvement for the benefit of the working classes’ and the second ‘to procure beer from Brains’. One of rooms had ‘Library’ written on the door, but on the day of the raid only a small number of books had been found ‘the tissue paper had not been removed from them, and they were placed on a shelf far out of the reach of members’. The magistrates’ conclusions were damning; the club had ‘not operated in good faith, there was frequent drunkenness on the premises, illegal sales of intoxicating liquor had taken place, persons who were not members were habitually admitted to the club for the purpose of obtaining intoxicating liquor, people were admitted as members without an interval of 48 hours and the supply of liquor was not under the control of the members’.<sup>78</sup>

The effects of the Sunday Closing Act 1881 were hotly contested and a Royal Commission was set up in 1889 to enquire into the implementation and impact of the legislation. The Commission concluded that the Act had been ‘constantly evaded and defied’ in Glamorganshire and Cardiff and had had the effect of increasing Sunday drunkenness in these areas. In spite of the evidence of the Act’s counter-productive impacts in the most populous areas of Wales, the Commission concluded that limited opening on a Sunday would be unwelcome to the majority of Welsh people and the legislation remained intact. Lambert argues that the commission’s conclusions were influenced by the intensive lobbying of temperance supporters and the fact that few working men were called to give evidence. The Act remained in place until the Licensing Act of 1961,<sup>79</sup> roughly the same time that the Sunday opening of cinemas became acceptable across Wales.

It is clear, therefore, that in spite of the Sunday Closing legislation, drinking and drunkenness on the Sabbath remained a significant problem in many south Wales valleys towns in the early 1900s when Non-conformists were campaigning against the Sunday opening of cinemas. An Aberdare Minister quoted statistics on arrests and prosecutions for drunkenness in a sermon delivered in October 1907 and said it was

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<sup>78</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 7<sup>th</sup> November 1912.

<sup>79</sup> Under which Act a referendum was held and Glamorganshire, Monmouthshire, Breconshire, Radnorshire and Flintshire voted for the Sunday sale of alcohol.

clear that ‘Glamorgan is far and away the most drunken county in Wales – more than twice as drunken as the neighbouring and smaller county of Monmouth; more than twice as drunken as the average for England and Wales, and about eight times worse than the most temperate city in England, and that its permanent place is amongst the very worst counties of England; and that really it is every year getting worse not better’.<sup>80</sup> The level of Sunday drunkenness allowed the pro-cinema lobby to quite reasonably argue that attending a Sunday evening film show was a more palatable alternative to hanging about street corners, border crossing into Monmouthshire to find an open public house or paying a visit to a private drinking den.

Another important argument in favour of Sunday opening was the quite considerable sums of money that Sunday film shows and concerts raised for charitable causes (Chapter Six describes more fully the charitable contributions made by cinema exhibitors). As Andy Croll has also argued, many members of the public also resented what they saw as the carping, high-handed tone of much Non-conformist approbation and its underlying assumption that cinema-goers were lacking in moral fibre. Letters in the local press frequently criticized churches for their condemnatory attitudes:-

*Allow me to utter a word of protest against the wholesale condemnation of Sunday picture entertainments...to state that Sunday picture lovers call down angelic pity on their heads is an unwarranted and arrogant assumption.*<sup>81</sup>

*On what grounds, I should like to know, do they object to these concerts being held. I may say although I have no business interest in any of these establishments, that in the past I have found a considerable amount of instruction and enjoyment in these Sunday evening concerts, and I am confident that many others have shared a like advantage...Bear in mind that I hold no malice against those desiring to patronise places of worship. Let them do as they wish in that respect, but don't let them try to deprive the sacred concert goers of their enjoyment.*<sup>82</sup>

In spite of the public reaction, six-day cinematograph licenses remained in force in the Gelligaer district for five years until 1917. However, it would be wrong to assume that the Sabbatarians had won the day and that the issue had been put to rest.

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<sup>80</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 12<sup>th</sup> October 1907.

<sup>81</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 30<sup>th</sup> March 1912.

<sup>82</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1912.



Indeed, the issue continued to whip up storms of dissension over the ensuing years. Attempts to rescind local authority resolutions to introduce six-day licenses were commonplace and colliers continued to petition and ballot in favour of Sunday opening. Regulatory authorities were caught in an uncomfortable quandary. If they succumbed to public opinion and granted seven-day licenses the religious, in particular Non-conformist, reaction would be instantaneous and robust. It should be remembered that most councillors and magistrates would have described themselves as religious, many were actively involved with their chapels/churches as deacons etc and some were serving vicars and ministers. For example, at Mountain Ash, the Reverend Tidman was an influential councillor and was undoubtedly instrumental in the council being one of the first in the south Wales valleys to introduce a Sunday ban (in March 1911). The local Free Church lobby was strong and well organised. When a councilor announced that he was intending to bring a motion to the council to rescind the Sunday ban, a conference of local churches and chapels was quickly organised and a deputation of twelve churchmen attended the council to argue their case.<sup>83</sup> Councillors would also have frequently heard sermons decrying the desecration of the Sabbath. For example, in April 1915 the Pastor of the Hanbury Road English Baptist Church in Bargoed dedicated a sermon to Sunday observance. He told his congregation that ‘a rest day for self enjoyment, pleasure seeking or nature worship is a rest day misused... Let no one think for a moment that they can play fast and loose with the Lord’s Day without suffering the penalty in body, soul and mind, both here and in the thereafter’.<sup>84</sup>

In the close knit communities of the south Wales valleys any civic leader who did not toe the Non-conformist line would have been known and many were publicly vilified. For example, when in 1915 William Davies, a deacon with Nazareth Baptist Church, Mountain Ash, provided the casting vote in favour of granting a cinematograph license to the Mountain Ash Institute for one Sunday in every three, a fellow chapel-goer wrote to the local newspaper asking ‘which vote represented the real William Davies? Believers in the theory of dual personality have here a striking example. Why did Cllr Davies cross over to the opposite camp and by his solitary

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<sup>83</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 30<sup>th</sup> March 1912.

<sup>84</sup> *Monmouth Guardian*, 16<sup>th</sup> April 1915.

vote turn the scales against a host of his Christian friends'.<sup>85</sup> Sunday opening became an intensely personal as well as religious and political issue. Another Mountain Ash councillor complained that council members were being constantly 'bullied and bandied' on the Sunday opening issue,<sup>86</sup> and a Merthyr councillor said he had 'parted company with good friends on the issue'.<sup>87</sup>

Exchanges between pro and anti Sunday cinema lobbies often became acrimonious. A Minister at a meeting of Free Churchmen held at Mountain Ash to discuss the Council's position on Sunday opening claimed the council was controlled by its officials and a few 'spouters'. Consequently, a Labour meeting was called at the Mountain Ash Institute to 'refute certain statements'. The chairman of the meeting described the free churchmen as a 'collection of plaster saints' and accused them of having used 'very disparaging words about certain men who are as good Christians as they are'. The workmen, who had 'assembled in large numbers', voted once more for Sunday opening.<sup>88</sup> A deputation of nine Ministers that subsequently attended a Mountain Ash UDC meeting to request that the council rescind its decision on Sunday opening was unsuccessful. Labour members were clearly irritated by the criticisms that the free churchmen had made of the council's competence, although the voting was again close with a majority of one voting not to rescind the previous decision.<sup>89</sup> The free churchmen took solace in the fact that many of the councillors had said their agreement to Sunday opening had hinged on the 'abnormal conditions of war' and the fact that the proceeds of the Institute's Sunday shows would benefit the Auxillary Fund which 'aided the dependents of our brave soldiers and sailors'.<sup>90</sup>

It appears that war time conditions may also have been a factor in Gelligaer UDC's decision to allow Sunday opening in 1917 when six councillors voted in favour and four against. Also, Jackson-Withers still had several friends on the council, including W. B. Lloyd who had spearheaded a number of campaigns to reinstate the New Hall Theatre's license to sell alcohol and who regularly rubbed shoulders with Jackson-Withers at various charitable events and meetings (as

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<sup>85</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1915.

<sup>86</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 27<sup>th</sup> October 1917.

<sup>87</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 26<sup>th</sup> June 1915.

<sup>88</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 20<sup>th</sup> June 1915.

<sup>89</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 26<sup>th</sup> June 1915.

<sup>90</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 26<sup>th</sup> June 1915.

described in Chapter Five). The ban on Sunday film exhibitions had also become a thorn in the side for the council, embroiling them in legal action on several occasions. The legal grounds for banning Sunday film exhibitions were in many cases weak or, at least, contestable, and as a consequence there were fairly frequent challenges of regulatory authority decisions.

The Sunday Observance Act of 1780 could only be used to outlaw opening on Sunday if members of the public were charged for entry, meaning that charitable events were exempt.<sup>91</sup> There were also limitations on the extent to which the Cinematograph Act 1909 could be used to restrict Sunday opening. Whilst a 1910 Court of Appeal decision supported councils attaching non-safety related conditions to licenses as long as those conditions were reasonable, a number of subsequent legal judgments threw doubt on the amount of latitude local authorities had in the matter. Furthermore, the exhibition of non-inflammable film fell outside the scope of the 1909 Act, thereby providing an opportunity for exhibitors to side-step the legislation. In spite of the legal uncertainties, most south Wales authorities continued to impose Sunday bans. Indeed, Gelligaer UDC introduced its Sunday ban just a few months after the town clerk had advised that cinematograph licenses could only be refused on public safety grounds. What appears to have emerged is an uneasy compromise, whereby local authorities attempted to pacify the Non-conformist lobby by issuing annual six-day licenses whilst reluctantly accepting that if non-inflammable films were used on Sunday there was little they could do to prevent the practice. Tacit acceptance of this arrangement is implied by the prosecution of the Dowlais Cinema Company in November 1914 for using an inflammable film on Sunday. The case was, however, dismissed with costs awarded as it appeared to be a genuine mistake. The local constable, P C Hunt, told the court that he had received three films from the cinema owner and had found one was inflammable. The Director of the company said that in view of the fact the police visited the hall every week they would not have used inflammable film willfully. The films were usually sent in a box marked inflammable but only seven out of eight films were tested. The firm supplying the film had written regretting their mistake.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Kinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1931.

<sup>92</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 26<sup>th</sup> November 1914.

The Hanbury cinema in Bargoed also used the non-inflammable loop-hole to show films on Sunday. In 1915 they appeared before Caerphilly magistrates requesting a Sunday music and dancing license. The proprietor explained that they were able to show films on Sundays (in spite of Gelligaer UDC's ban) because they used non-inflammable films and they wanted to play accompanying music. The films shown were of a 'religious or historical character' and if the magistrates granted the application it would be 'an inducement to stop the practice of large numbers of people crossing over to Monmouthshire on Sunday evenings for the purpose of obtaining intoxicants'. The application was refused.<sup>93</sup>

In the early days of film exhibition music and dancing licenses were issued on an ad hoc basis. For example, since it opened in 1911, the Abertridw Institute had received special permission for Sunday opening on a weekly basis. 'Every Tuesday, as regularly as clockwork the secretary of the Abertridw Institute attended the Caerphilly Police Court to make an application for permission to hold a sacred concert on Sunday evening for charitable purposes'.<sup>94</sup> In February 1912, the institute applied to the court for an annual seven-day license, since attending the court every week 'involved time and money' and meant they were unable to advertise the concerts very far in advance.<sup>95</sup> The application was rejected and a few months later the magistrates announced that they would no longer issue Sunday licenses, even on an ad hoc basis.<sup>96</sup> Six-day music and dancing licenses were introduced a few months later and remained in place for several years, although there were regular breaches. For example, the Palace cinema and New Hall Theatre, Bargoed were summoned by Gelligaer UDC in April 1914 for breaching their music and dancing licenses which stipulated that premises should not be used for such purposes on Sundays. The Council won its case against the Palace, but before the case against the New Hall could be heard, the defendant, Mr Iorwerth, company secretary of the Palace Cinema Company Ltd, expressed his intention to take his case to Appeal. There had been a recent County of London Sessions decision that since music had not been a principal part of the cinematograph entertainment it was unnecessary for a music and dancing license to be obtained. Iorwerth and Jackson-Withers (who had

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<sup>93</sup> *Monmouth Guardian*, 12<sup>th</sup> February 1915.

<sup>94</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 14<sup>th</sup> March 1912.

<sup>95</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 17<sup>th</sup> February 1912.

<sup>96</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 18<sup>th</sup> July 1912.

contributed towards the costs of the appeal) were clearly optimistic that the County of London judgment would have a wider application. The appeal was heard in June 1914 and the defence lawyer relied heavily on the County of London precedent, arguing that the music played at the Palace cinema had simply involved a Mrs Thompson playing the piano and that this was merely subsidiary to the exhibition of the pictures. 'No reasonable person would pay 1s or whatever price was charged, just to hear a few tunes hammered out on the piano'. The lawyer argued that the act was not intended to deal with Sunday cinemas, but was to cope with the good government of music halls. The bench retired for about fifteen minutes and 'upon their return the chairman intimated that they had considered the case very carefully and had found that the music constituted a substantial part of the entertainment'. However, since it was the first offence they only imposed a fine of 10s.

Subsequent to this decision, a number of cinemas circumvented the ban by not playing accompanying music on Sundays. Caerphilly Magistrates attempted to stamp out this practice by refusing to issue music and dancing licenses for the rest of the week unless cinema proprietors gave an undertaking that they would not open on Sundays. For example, early in 1918 the Hanbury and Palace cinemas applied to Caerphilly magistrates for their annual music and dancing licenses. The magistrates, clearly disapproved of 'Gelligaer being the only area in the county of Glamorganshire where Sunday opening was allowed' and made it clear that they would only grant permission if the applicants gave an undertaking that they would not open on Sundays. Solicitors for the Hanbury and Palace cinemas argued that the magistrates did not have the power to close the cinemas on Sundays. At the Hanbury cinema, for example, they had a violin and piano but these were only played six days a week not on Sundays. 'The magistrates therefore had really no more right to interfere with the license on a Sunday any more than they could if a Sunday school was held on the premises. It was quite outside the scope of the bench to ask for a verbal undertaking'. Gelligaer council having granted a 7 days license, the Hanbury cinema had booked films in advance to July and would stand to lose a considerable amount of money. The solicitors also pointed out the discrepancies between different licenses. The New Hall theatre had a dramatic license and so had a 'distinct advantage' since they did not require a music and dancing license. Patronage would

be diverted from the two cinemas to the New Hall on Sundays thus creating a ‘serious injustice’.

Superintendent Williams who was in attendance at the court said that in his view no music and dancing licenses should be issued for Sundays as it would ‘involve extra labour on the police and was also an attraction to the wives of soldiers’. The licenses were eventually awarded but only on the basis that the cinema proprietors gave an undertaking that they would not open on Sundays. It is likely that the magistrates were able to extract the undertaking because without a music and dancing license they would not be able to play live music on any day of the week.<sup>97</sup> However, by the early 1920s Caerphilly magistrates had accepted that if cinemas did not play music on Sundays, they could not insist on the closure of cinemas. For example, in 1922 they told a Free Church delegation that they had no power to close Llanbradach cinema on Sundays since no music was played and referred the delegation to Caerphilly UDC who had powers under the 1909 Cinematograph Act.<sup>98</sup>

There was also confusion surrounding the rights endowed by a dramatic license as opposed to a cinematograph license. At the same time that cinema proprietors were being refused seven day cinematograph licenses, the New Hall, Bargoed was being granted a full dramatic license, which seems to have carried with it the right to open on a Sunday. The attempts by regulatory authorities to use various laws and regulations (most of which were never intended to address the Sunday observance issue) to ban films exhibitions on Sundays inevitably led to multiple legal wrangles and contraventions.

The re-introduction of seven-day licenses by Gelligaer UDC in 1917 is likely to have had several catalysts. The fact that six-day licenses had been introduced by a majority of only one meant that the position was likely to be an unstable one. Jackson-Withers (and in all likelihood other cinema owners) continued to have allies on the council and it seems that council members had grown weary of the legal quagmire that the Sunday ban had dragged them into. Wartime conditions had also led to a readjustment of priorities and for some a softening of attitudes towards

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<sup>97</sup> *Monmouth Guardian*, 15<sup>th</sup> March 1918.

<sup>98</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 11<sup>th</sup> February 1922.

Sunday opening. How finely balanced the issue of Sunday observance continued to be is highlighted by the fact that only six months before the vote to allow the Sunday opening of cinemas, the council endorsed a resolution passed by Mountain Ash UDC that ‘in view of the urgent national need of the greatest economy in labour, money and material resources, his Majesty’s Government should forthwith introduce...legislation to prohibit during the period of the war and for such further period as may be thought expedient the opening on Sundays of Refreshment Houses, whether licensed or unlicensed, and also the opening of shops and all Sunday trading’.<sup>99</sup>

## Conclusion

It is clear that there was considerable discretion, as well as confusion, surrounding the implementation of cinema-related regulatory powers by local licensing authorities leading to widely varying interpretations and practices. For example, Glamorgan County Council delegated its licensing powers to district councils, whilst Gwent County Council exercised the powers itself. Even within a single authority there was often a lack of consistency. This created considerable business uncertainty for cinemas, many of whom resorted to legal loop-holes to circumvent some of the more damaging restrictions.

In spite of the prevailing view that Sunday opening bans were deeply entrenched in Wales, the research presented here suggests that majorities on cinema-related decisions were frequently slight with opinions oscillating from one debate to the next. This fluidity of opinion and approach reflects the conflicted context of cinema and commercialised leisure more generally. On the one hand cinema represented modernity and advancement for towns desperate to throw off their parochial reputations; on the other hand cinema had the potential to upset the settled order in which chapel and church dominated non-work life. The debates on cinema also had a broader resonance touching on issues such as state control versus individual responsibility and liberty; the appropriate balance between national and local regulation and the respective jurisdictions of local regulatory bodies. In the

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<sup>99</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UD/G/C/1/12.

‘face-to-face communities’ of the south Wales valleys, civic leaders and licensing authorities were also subject to intensive lobbying whether it was via public petitions, formal delegations or more personal approaches over the committee or dinner table.

The prevalence of anti-cinema sentiment was not confined to the south Wales valleys. As Biltreyst, Maltby and Meers have stated, ‘probably more than any other art form or medium in the twentieth century, cinema has been the object of harsh control, either in the straightforward form of censorship or other more complex forms of discipline’.<sup>100</sup> Although interventions were often inspired by local imperatives, they were also responses to anxieties created by cinema’s modernity and its perceived displacement of more traditional, respectable and ‘safe’ recreations. Several chapters in *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: New perspectives on European cinema history* describe a range of ‘disciplining forces’ across continental Europe, including government intervention and state film policy, military forces, religious groups and institutions and progressive movements. The view is of cinema as a ‘site of ideological struggle where modernity is confronted by forces representing counter or even anti-modern values’.<sup>101</sup>

Although class and politics undoubtedly affected attitudes to cinema, there was no simple correlation between the two. Generally, the new breed of local Labour politicians were more accepting of the new medium (colliers frequently voted in favour of Sunday opening), but this was by no means automatic. Of more influence during the early years of cinema was how involved civic leaders were with their chapel/church and faith. Williams has pointed out that ‘Labour did not make a dramatic break with religion: many Labour public representatives were practicing Christians, chapel deacons, some even lay preachers.’<sup>102</sup> Cyril Gwyther, who had been a Methodist minister at Tonypany between 1935 and 1947, was interviewed by Williams and was of the view that ‘the majority of them [members of the Labour Party] were men who had some sort of attachment to the church or chapel...I’m not suggesting that everybody in the Labour Party went to church or chapel on Sundays

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<sup>100</sup> Daniel Biltreyst, Richard Maltby and Philippe Meers (eds.), *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: New perspectives on European cinema history* (London and New York, 1912) p.6.

<sup>101</sup> Biltreyst, Maltby and Meers (eds.), *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity*, p.7.

<sup>102</sup> Chris Williams, *Capitalism, Community and Conflict: The South Wales Coalfield 1898-1947* (Cardiff, 1998) p.55.



but they had, shall I say, a religious background, a religious interpretation of life... their approach was always along the lines of persuasion and consensus, more than using force'.<sup>103</sup> Andy Croll, who writes of the growing marginalization of Non-conformism due to its 'employment of a puritanical discourse that condemned all but the holiest recreations' also acknowledges that the picture should not be overdrawn. 'Non-conformists, despite their increasing marginality, were still significant players in the social life of Wales'.<sup>104</sup>

Also, whilst Anglicans were generally more tolerant of cinema than Non-conformists, there were no hard and fast rules. In time most Anglicans, such as the usually moderate Rector of Bargoed, joined the Sabbatarian cause, and at Mountain Ash, the Reverend Tidman, an Anglican, was the firebrand leader of the local anti-cinema lobby. Just as the citizens of the south Wales valleys had a 'clustering of identities, economic, political and social', so there could be no automatic read across from political or religious affiliation to attitude to cinema.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Williams, *Capitalism, Community and Conflict*, p.111.

<sup>104</sup> Croll, *Civilising the Urban*, pp. 200+214.

<sup>105</sup> Williams, *Capitalism, Community and Conflict*, p.77.

## Chapter Six

### **Players on a public stage: The incorporation of cinema into community life, 1900 –1920**

*Everyone has a lurking wish to appear considerable in his native place*  
Dr Samuel Johnson<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after Albert Jackson-Withers took on the lease of the Theatre Royal in Merthyr Tydfil in 1907 he invited Harry Southey, the proprietor and editor of the *Merthyr Express*, on a balloon ride setting off from Penydarren Park and aiming for Hereford or possibly as far as Birmingham. The editor eagerly accepted the invitation since ‘motor trips and other small fry come every day more or less, but it is not every day one gets the opportunity for an aerial flight of this description’.<sup>2</sup> However, ‘the elements did not concur’ with Jackson-Withers’ plans and they were forced to go where the balloon ‘under the vagaries of the various currents of air’ took them. Several hours later they landed some twenty miles north of Merthyr Tydfil ‘on a desolate mountain with a balloon to pack and convey to the road over a mile away, the biggest part of which was down a precipitous descent of about 800 feet, thickly studded with crags and boulders’. They eventually reached a public house where they persuaded the landlord to provide them with supper but were unable to secure any transport back to Merthyr Tydfil. They had no option but to ‘finish the rest of the weary road on foot arriving back at 1.30am not much the worse for the trip other than being thoroughly done-up’. The editor shares the highlights and low points of the adventure with his readers in a light-hearted article entitled ‘Up in a Balloon, Boys!’ The misadventure did not seem to have harmed Jackson-Withers’ public relations objectives since Southey enthusiastically promoted a three-day long Grand Fete and Gala organised by Jackson-Withers (which featured, amongst other attractions, a ‘large captive balloon’) and continued to give generous publicity to the Theatre Royal for the duration of Jackson-Withers’ tenure in Merthyr Tydfil.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Joshua Reynolds, 17<sup>th</sup> July 1771.

<sup>2</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 25<sup>th</sup> May 1907.

<sup>3</sup> Jackson Withers sold his interest in the Theatre Royal Merthyr in 1915.

Most early cinema entrepreneurs were as adept at public relations as any modern reputation-conscious corporation. They may not have had a PR strategy but they actively promoted the community wide benefits of cinema and used a variety of methods to disarm any local opposition. Enlisting the support of the local press was an important priority since the press controlled the ‘most significant space within which public opinion could be formed and re-formed’.<sup>4</sup> Southey was, in Andy Croll’s words, one of Merthyr Tydfil’s chief ‘civic boosters’, someone Jackson-Withers needed to get on side if his new business in the town was to thrive.

Public relations were of paramount importance during the early years of cinema. It was a period when the foundations of the cinema industry were laid and first impressions of the new medium were formed. During this ‘expansive’ period the number of cinemas multiplied significantly (to such an extent that there was little need for additional provision post World War One) and cinema proprietors sought to extend their reach in terms of audiences and local support. Also, as Chapter Five has demonstrated, there were pockets of intense and stubborn resistance to cinema and cinema owners needed all of their ingenuity and determination to overcome them.

When Jackson-Withers opened the New Hall theatre in Bargoed in 1908 he expressed his intention to move to Bargoed to ‘get amongst them’ - ‘them’ being local civic leaders who dominated public life.<sup>5</sup> This chapter uses the prisms of Bargoed and Jackson-Withers’ associational life to better understand the civic leadership of south Wales valleys towns, including who civic leaders were, how status was bestowed and how influence was exercised. The chapter then proceeds to examine how cinema entrepreneurs, and Jackson-Withers in particular, sought to incorporate themselves, and the institution of cinema, into the everyday life of communities. It describes how they networked with local civic leaders and the press, made well publicized donations to local good causes and tirelessly promoted the community benefits of cinema. During World War One, with the resourcefulness characteristic of the industry, they took every opportunity to demonstrate the public service aspects of cinema by, for

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<sup>4</sup> Andy Croll, *Civilising the Urban; Popular culture and public space in Merthyr, c1870-1914* (Cardiff, 2000), p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 10<sup>th</sup> December 1908.

example, showing Government information films, lending their halls for recruitment purposes and contributing to multiple war charities. However, as we shall go on to see, acceptance of the industry ultimately owed more to the broad social, economic and political changes that were sweeping the country post World War One than to the (albeit considerable) efforts of individual cinema entrepreneurs.

### **Bargoed's civic elite**

In spite of the widespread endorsement of the aims of the civic project, the depth of involvement varied significantly both between and within classes. A relatively small number of predominantly middle class people were closely involved and could be described as 'civic leaders'. These usually had multiple community roles and a high local public profile. Just as Andy Croll found in Merthyr Tydfil, the development of local government structures in the early 1900s in many south Wales valleys towns provided a number of political and administrative opportunities for aspiring civic leaders.<sup>6</sup> A major milestone for Bargoed was Gelligaer Rural District Council being awarded urban status in 1908, the same year that Jackson-Withers acquired the New Hall Theatre in the town.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the local council, civic leaders were members of the Magistry, Local Health Board, Board of Guardians and Police Authority. However, their sphere of influence extended beyond state sponsored bodies (albeit these did form the bedrock of their status and authority); they were also active members of churches and chapels, social and voluntary groups, fraternal organisations, political parties and business organisations. It could also be argued that church/chapel served as much a social as a spiritual role with many 'civic leaders' acting as wardens, deacons and vicar's 'sidesmen'.

Not only was there considerable overlap of membership between the rapidly multiplying civic organisations that marked the growing maturity of the south Wales valleys, there was also significant duplication of remit. Bargoed Chamber of Trade, set up in 1902 to 'improve the town commercially, socially and civically',<sup>8</sup> was

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<sup>6</sup> Croll, *Civilising the Urban*, p.42.

<sup>7</sup> Urban district council powers were conferred September 1908, *Bargoed Journal*, 17<sup>th</sup> September 1908.

<sup>8</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 8<sup>th</sup> December 1910.

actively involved in a wide range of local issues, including policing, railway services, postal services, parks, street cleansing as well as the performance of the local council. Chamber members were a mixed, albeit mainly middle-class, bunch. The *Bargoed Journal* reporting on a Chamber of Trade outing to London in July 1908 said that ‘representatives of almost every trade, profession and calling – the scribe and provision merchant, the worker of metals, the seller of fish, the purveyor of liquids, the trainer of off-springs, the filler of stomachs, the maker of garments, the (out) fitter of hats, the in-taker of things, the undertaker of folk, the driver of horses, of quills and of needles, the remover of goods, and of molars and whiskers – were scattered throughout the coaches’.<sup>9</sup> The overlap of membership between key organisations is illustrated by the fact that at their annual meeting in 1908, 20 of the 37 Chamber of Trade members present (54%) were local councillors with the newly formed Gelligaer UDC. Indeed three of the councillors had been put forward as candidates by the Chamber of Trade. With such an overlap of membership and remit it is unsurprising that many council issues received an early airing at Chamber of Trade meetings, the latter acting almost as a council ante-chamber. One of the advantages of this was that positions were known and could be negotiated in advance of formal decisions being taken, a major advantage given the plurality of interests represented.

As England found in mid nineteenth century Merthyr Tydfil, civic leaders were also bound together informally through marriage, kinship, freemasonry, Nonconformity, and living alongside each other in premier residential areas.<sup>10</sup> Seventy per cent of Bargoed’s ‘private residents’ listed in the Kelly’s Trading Directory for 1920 lived in Hillside Park, the town’s most salubrious residential area (80% if the six church/chapel Ministers included in the directory are excluded). Many also shared office space. For example, Lloyds Bank Chambers on Bargoed High Street was home to two solicitors firms, an estate agency, an accountancy firm and two life assurance companies. Civic leaders’ influence was exercised informally as well as formally, covertly as well as overtly, through a wide range of associational mechanisms. England describes the ‘striking number’ of middle class radicals that were Freemasons, members of the Merthyr Loyal Cambrian Lodge, during the middle

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<sup>9</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1908.

<sup>10</sup> Joe England, ‘Unitarians, Freemasons, Chartists: The Middle Class in Victorian Merthyr’, *Welsh History Review*, 23:4 (December 2007), pp. 35-58.

of the nineteenth century, although he concedes that this was no accident since membership was by invitation.<sup>11</sup> The Lodge was similarly an important consolidating force for the civic leadership in Bargoed. The Hanbury Lodge of the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes counted most of Bargoed's leading townsmen amongst its membership. The importance of kinship and neighbourliness in furthering business interests is illustrated by the circumstances in which the Withers brothers became acquainted (and were subsequently to become business partners) with Julian Hodge who at the time had a 'modest accountancy practice' but was later to become a major financier and founder of the Bank of Wales. Their business association began in the 1930s when Francis Cam (manager of the Bargoed cinemas and son-in-law of Alfred Withers) recommended Hodge to the Withers. Cam had heard of Hodge's tax and accountancy expertise from his next-door neighbor in Pontllanfraith, one of Hodge's early clients.<sup>12</sup>

Two of the most important skills for civic leadership were public speaking and negotiation. Jackson-Withers' discomfort at being asked to speak at a Chamber of Trade dinner strongly suggests that although he was eager to develop positive relationships with Bargoed's civic elite, he had no ambition to become a member of the 'inner circle'. He said that for him to make a toast was like 'fitting a square peg into a round hole' although his efforts were roundly applauded.<sup>13</sup> When another Chamber of Trade member, Horace J. Davies, a building contractor, spoke the local paper describes his delivery as 'mumbled and indistinct' suggesting that he lacked the qualities of a 'public man'.<sup>14</sup> Above all it was necessary for civic leaders to put (or to be seen to be putting) public interests above sectional interests or personal ambition. Both Croll and Light have vividly described how support for civic leaders was contingent on the 'successful maintenance of a public persona' and that the public were ever 'alert to motivational factors'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> England, 'Unitarians, Freemasons, Chartists'.

<sup>12</sup> Timothy O'Sullivan, *Julian Hodge: A Biography* (London, 1981), p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 10<sup>th</sup> December 1908.

<sup>14</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 10<sup>th</sup> December 1908.

<sup>15</sup> Croll, *Civilising the Urban*; Julie Light, "'...mere seekers of fame'?: personalities, power and politics in the small town: Pontypool and Bridgend, c. 1860-95", *Urban History*, 32:01 (May 2005), pp.88-99.

As other histories of the south Wales valleys have found, the same names appear time and time again in newspaper reports, minutes of meetings and local directories indicating the presence of an inner circle of ‘civic leaders’. Light found the same names cropping up in Pontypool, Bridgend and Penarth, and concluded that these were the people involved in ‘making things happen’<sup>16</sup> and that ‘power and influence actually rested in very few hands’.<sup>17</sup> Although not formally appointed to the ‘civic elite’, they would have been recognised locally as important public figures. The brief pen-portraits of two of Bargoed’s civic leaders, below, vividly illustrate their multi-various and publically visible roles.

One of Bargoed’s early civic leaders was Evan Thomas. His many roles included miners’ agent for the Rhymney Valley, county councillor, chairman of the local education authority, Baptist deacon and trustee of Rhymney Valley Permanent Thrift Society. He died prematurely aged 52 in March 1909 and was buried at the Baptist church, Cefn Hengoed. Reports of his funeral, which appeared in several local papers, highlights the esteem with which he was regarded locally. One paper reported that the funeral procession extended about three quarters of a mile and numbered about 3000. ‘The coffin, by the desire of the miners, was carried the whole distance from Bargoed to Cefn Hengoed by relays of men, who along the hilly, rough and muddy roads, had to be relieved every 100 yards’. The procession included contingents from the county council, local police force, fire brigade, South Wales Miners’ Executive, as well as MPs and Ministers.<sup>18</sup>

Another ‘civic leader’, who was to become a close ally of Jackson-Withers, was W.B. Lloyd, a colliery contractor who had migrated to Wales from Lancashire when he was 28 and had subsequently won the contract to sink the pits for Powell Duffryn. Lloyd held numerous public positions, including county and district councillor and Justice of the Peace; was involved in many charitable causes, including personally funding the annual Christmas dinner for the poor of Bargoed and acting as president of the Bargoed May Day show; was one-time president of the Bargoed

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<sup>16</sup> Julie Light, ‘The Middle Classes as Urban Elites in Nineteenth Century Wales’, *Welsh History Review*, 24:3 (June, 2009), pp.29-55.

<sup>17</sup> Julie Light, ‘“...mere seekers of fame”?: personalities, power and politics in the small town: Pontypool and Bridgend, c. 1860-95’, *Urban History*, 32:01 (May 2005).

<sup>18</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 27<sup>th</sup> March 1909.

Chamber of Trade and Rhymney Valley Thrift Society; was a Freemason; and was a director of several companies including the Bargoed Electric Light Supply Company, a small colliery in the Rhondda and a building company.<sup>19</sup>

As far as possible, cinema owners and managers cooperated with the authorities as they did not want to risk having their licenses revoked or renewal refused (especially since there was no entitlement to appeal), nor did they want to alienate civic leaders on whose support they depended. As Audrey Field has written, from its early days ‘the cinema has done its best to be all things to all men, women and children’.<sup>20</sup> Cinema owners/managers often had to devise their own methods for ensuring they complied with regulatory requirements. For example, a notice asking parents not to bring children in arms to shows (during an epidemic) in a cinema in Rhymney had had no effect, so the proprietor had substituted it with an announcement that admission would be allowed for children in arms at the price of one guinea. As the Medical Officer reported to Rhymney UDC ‘that had had the desired effect’.<sup>21</sup> Rather than be swept this way and that by the shifting winds of local opinion, cinema proprietors set about winning over the hearts and minds of the civic elite and the wider public, and in so doing hoped to prevent issues arising in the first place. It should also be remembered that even if opposition had not emerged locally, proprietors would have been well aware of problems elsewhere in the region and nationally, and many (ex) theatre proprietors were old hands at having to manipulate public opinion. The remainder of this chapter describes the three most commonly applied methods for winning over local support during the period up to c1920; that is networking with civic leaders and the local press; contributing to local good causes; and promoting the educational and public value of films.

### **The glue that bonded the civic elite together**

Given the importance attached to parochial loyalty and the fact that he already had a foothold in Merthyr Tydfil and Aberaman, Jackson-Withers went to considerable lengths to insert himself into Bargoed ‘society’ when he took on the lease of the New

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<sup>19</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, April 28<sup>th</sup> 1910.

<sup>20</sup> Audrey Field, *Picture Palace* (London, 1974).

<sup>21</sup> *Monmouth Guardian*, 15th March 1918.



Hall Theatre in January 1908. The attraction of the town no doubt lay in its growing populace, the lack of any commercial leisure facilities and the opportunity that represented for establishing a successful business. Within months of arriving in the town he hosted Bargoed's first annual ball at the New Hall Theatre. The event generated considerable local excitement, the *Bargoed Journal* predicting that the ball 'bids fair to prove one of the most fashionable events ever brought off in the valley'.<sup>22</sup> It is clear that Jackson-Withers already had his sights on Bargoed's leading citizens. He invited the vicar (who was also a local councillor) to be president of the ball, two other leading local councillors to be vice-presidents and a prominent member of the Chamber of Trade to be chairman. Signaling a degree of acceptance, he is subsequently invited to a number of the town's annual dinners and banquets, including the Chamber of Trade annual dinner held in November 1908 where he made a 'great speech' offering the New Hall free of charge for 'any object where it is obvious many will benefit' and a £25 contribution towards promoting the town.<sup>23</sup> The £25 donation subsequently got caught up with a theatre licensing issue (discussed later in this chapter) and it was not until April 1909 that the Chamber of Trade finally decided to spend the money on advertising hoardings located at twenty-five local train stations and wrote to Jackson-Withers thanking him for his generous contribution.<sup>24</sup>

By early 1909, some twelve months after he first opened the New Hall Theatre, Jackson-Withers was not only a member of the Chamber of Trade, but sat on several local committees, including the May Day Show and Flower Show committees. It would be easy to dismiss these committees as worthy pastimes for people with too much time on their hands. However, they were a critically important part of the glue that bonded the civic 'elite' together. For example, in 1908 the president of the May Day Show was Lewis Watkins, Bargoed colliery manager, a Baptist Chapel deacon and someone who took 'a keen interest in the municipal affairs of the district'.<sup>25</sup> Many of the leading members of Gelligaer UDC and the chamber of trade were actively involved with the May Day arrangements and many of Powell Duffryn's most senior managers at Bargoed Colliery, although not members of the committee, attended the

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<sup>22</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 9<sup>th</sup> January 1908.

<sup>23</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 26<sup>th</sup> November 1908.

<sup>24</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 8<sup>th</sup> April 1909.

<sup>25</sup> Report on Lewis Watkins' resignation from Powell Duffryn to take up a position at Taylor's Navigation Collieries. He had been at Bargoed colliery for thirteen years and his departure was described as a 'deplorable loss to the locality' by the *Monmouth Guardian*, 8<sup>th</sup> January 1915.

annual dinner held each year to celebrate another successful show. The speeches given at the 1908 dinner highlight the compulsion to bind the various interests represented at the meeting into a unified force. When one of the hosts said that Powell Duffryn was ‘by far the largest industrial concern in the valley that which Bargoed tradespeople lived or died by’ a senior colliery manager responded by admitting that he had many men under him and that he made every effort to select men who would become ‘worthy citizens’, and he thought he could boast that they had as ‘good a class of workmen as could be found in the Kingdom’ (applause). The workmen also ‘wanted to foster the importance of the place’ (hear, hear).<sup>26</sup>

Jackson Withers became a member of the Hanbury Lodge of the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes, which was committed to ‘conviviality and a better understanding between each other as brothers’ and also joined the Loyal Order of Dromedarians, a locally based, more frivolous ‘fraternity’ which appears to have been largely dedicated to members spending convivial evenings together. By 1915 Jackson-Withers had moved to Hillside Park, Bargoed’s premier residential area where the majority of Bargoed’s civic elite lived. He had also engaged John Evans, secretary of Bargoed Chamber of Trade (and its president in 1911) as his local solicitor. Although it is impossible to fully reconstruct Jackson-Withers’ associational networks, it is apparent that he regularly rubbed shoulders with Bargoed’s leading residents in a variety of contexts, including committee meetings, charitable and social events, over dinner and on various outings.

A number of cinema proprietors went a stage further and stood for public office. For example, Waltar Haggar, a leading figure in the development of film-making and exhibition in Wales, became a Poor Law Guardian in 1913 and an Aberdare UDC councillor in 1914, serving with the council until 1919. However, following his death in 1925, the *Aberdare Leader*, in a tribute to the man and his life, suggested that the council chamber may not have been Haggar’s natural habitat and that he was ‘showman first and last’.<sup>27</sup> The industry’s trade body, the Kinematograph

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<sup>26</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1908.

<sup>27</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 14<sup>th</sup> February 1915, as reported in Peter Yorke, *William Haggar, Fairground Film Maker: Biography of a pioneer of the cinema* (Mid Glamorgan, 2007).

Exhibitors Association, encouraged its members to put themselves forward for public office:-

*There is a very satisfactory record of public service by kinema men, particularly in the provinces, but the work they have already done must be consolidated and strengthened by the accession to their ranks of still more. The average exhibitor has many natural advantages which help him in attaining municipal honours. The gifts which have made him a showman are the same which contribute to public service.*<sup>28</sup>

Jackson-Withers continued to court the local press, the ‘showmen’s modern megaphone’, although his allegiances switched over the years as business interests expanded into new locations and the geographical coverage of newspapers shifted. In his early years in Bargoed, Jackson-Withers was eager to enlist the support of Percy S. Phillips, the colourful proprietor and editor of the *Bargoed Journal*. However, when the paper became more Caerphilly and Pontypridd orientated in around 1912, his efforts were redirected towards the *Monmouth Guardian*. One of the most certain ways to secure positive editorial comment was to place advertisements. This quid pro quo became almost a cinema industry standard practice. The Kinematograph Year Book for 1917 reported that the press had become ‘far more amenable especially when advertisements began to be circulated amongst them’<sup>29</sup> and the 1925 year book included an article specifically on using the press more effectively:-

*Thousands of pounds of newspaper space for nothing! This is the great opportunity awaiting those who work in the film industry who care to compete for it. Editors are waiting for good news paragraphs and special articles. This is a chance for wide-awake renters and exhibitors to ‘tell the world’ about their wares. The showmen’s modern megaphone is the press.*<sup>30</sup>

The article advised readers that a line of editorial was not only free but worth many columns of paid for advertisements since ‘readers believe it is from an unbiased outsider’. However, it was important not to send ‘reams of dope’ to editors. ‘No matter how small the newspaper, the editor is usually very careful about what he prints’. Film exhibitors are advised to remember to include something compelling like a ‘romantic element’ or the ‘human touch’ and to bear in mind that ‘every line in the

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<sup>28</sup> Kinematograph Exhibitors’ Association Year Book, 1932.

<sup>29</sup> Kinematograph Exhibitors’ Association Year Book, 1917.

<sup>30</sup> Kinematograph Exhibitors’ Association Year Book, 1925.

Press about your film means more money to you'. It is clear that at the national and local levels, film exhibitors recognized the power of the press to shape opinion and that, given the opposition to cinema that lay in some quarters, it was essential to secure positive coverage.

Jackson-Withers regularly placed advertisements in local papers, especially in the early years of running his business. For example, in February 1908 he placed a full front-page advertisement for the pantomime *Aladdin* and the accompanying editorial is gushingly positive, informing readers that 'owing to the enormous crowds expected special precautions will be taken to protect the public waiting outside'.<sup>31</sup> Another device employed by theatre/cinema proprietors was the 'free list' that involved the issuing of free tickets to local worthies, including the local press. The editor of the *Bargoed Journal* complained in June 1908 that 'no ticket was sent to the *Bargoed Journal* for the concert at the Bargoed Hall on Wednesday' and asked 'who was the secretary?'.<sup>32</sup> Another ploy, albeit of a one-off nature, was to invite civic leaders, including the local press, to an opening ceremony. A Kinematograph Exhibitors' Association hand book for cinema proprietors and managers recommends 'securing the attendance of the Member of Parliament of the division, the Chief Magistrate of the City or Town, Chairman of the County or Borough Council, Vicar of the Parish, or some other person of standing to declare the kinema open. This lends éclat to the send-off and attracts those whose patronage, though much to be desired, is sometimes otherwise hard to obtain'.<sup>33</sup>

### **'With characteristic foresight and benevolence'**

Cinema proprietors also assiduously promoted the community benefits of cinema and were generous contributors to local good causes. This benefactor role was critically important to cinemas being accepted by local communities. Most cinema proprietors were acutely aware that any perception that they were there simply to squeeze as much profit as possible out of the local community would ultimately damage their

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<sup>31</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 6<sup>th</sup> February 1908.

<sup>32</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 4<sup>th</sup> June 1908.

<sup>33</sup> Kinematograph Weekly, *How to run a Picture House: A Handbook for Proprietors, Managers and Exhibitors* (London, 1912), p. 49.

business. Although ‘to town and trade’ was one of the most popular toasts at society dinners, an unwritten rule was that trade should be conducted fairly. In September 1908, the *Bargoed Journal* published a letter from a vicar exhorting traders to be more Christian, ‘to leaven and sweeten the relationship between buyer and seller’.<sup>34</sup> When trading became exploitative, community relations could sour very quickly. For example, although the riots of summer 1911, that affected many valleys towns including Bargoed, are likely to have had multiple causes, some rooted deeply in socio-economic relations, an aggravating factor, and one that certainly affected the targeting of riot action, was profiteering by local tradespeople and landlords.<sup>35</sup> In fact, the *Bargoed Journal* attributed most of the trouble that erupted on the evening of August 21<sup>st</sup> 1911 to this cause and roundly criticized the Bargoed trades-people involved;

*One of the worst features of the [railway] strike was the raising of the price of food commodities to famine prices, and all in a moment. We cannot find words too strong in reprehending this action on the part of the tradesmen in the valley. One can regard it as criminal on the part of the shopkeepers to seek to make a good profit on the backs of poor people who under ordinary circumstances find it hard enough to get bread and cheese...It has been openly stated that certain shops were marked for window smashing and looting.*<sup>36</sup>

The attribution of blame quickly became divisive. Bargoed trades-people claimed they had not raised their prices and a number accused the *Bargoed Journal* of inciting people to riot. The following week, the paper adhered to its story claiming that ‘enquiries reveal seven Bargoed and district tradespeople raised their prices of certain food stuffs on the second day of the railway strike. We have made sure of our facts before we put them in cold print’.<sup>37</sup> One of the tradespeople whose shop was damaged billed the town with notices to the effect he would give £5 to charity to any person

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<sup>34</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1908.

<sup>35</sup> Analyses of the riots that occurred in several valleys towns vary in the extent to which they attribute the causes to deeply rooted socio-economic and cultural (including racial) issues as opposed to the flashpoints of strike action, profiteering and even unseasonably hot weather. See, for example, Dai Smith, ‘Tonypandy 1910: Definitions of a community’, *Past and Present*, 87:1 (May 1980), pp. 158-184; Colin Holmes, ‘The Tredegar Riots of 1911’, *Welsh History Review*, 11:2 (December, 1982), pp. 214-225; W. D. Rubinstein, ‘The anti-Jewish riots of 1911 in South Wales; a re-examination’, *Welsh History Review*, 18:4 (December 1997), pp. 667-699; Deian Hopkins, ‘The Llanelli riots, 1911’, *Welsh History Review*, 11:4 (December 1983), pp.488-515.

<sup>36</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 24<sup>th</sup> August 1911.

<sup>37</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 31<sup>st</sup> August 1911.

who could prove he sold butter above 1s 3d per pound.<sup>38</sup> A Labour supporter wrote to the *Bargoed Journal* saying that the town's 'elite' were spreading word that local socialists were behind the riots.<sup>39</sup> The civic elite fairly quickly coalesced around the proposition that the riots had been the responsibility of a small number of hooligans from outside the area, thereby reconstructing the image of the town as a unified, mutually supportive community. Dai Smith found the same compulsion to blame outsiders following the Tonypandy riots of 1910 when a 'tirade of arraignment was directed against the outcast groups of youths, drunks and strangers'.<sup>40</sup>

The fact that most cinema entrepreneurs were locally based businessmen or professionals (as outlined in Chapter Four) would certainly have helped the cinema industry's acceptance at the local level, although this would also depend on how closely entrepreneurs were associated with their business (many used front of house managers) and of individual reputations. Jackson-Withers was very firmly associated with his business and as an 'outsider' worked especially hard to establish his civic credentials. His offer of the New Hall theatre free of charge for local good causes represented a major community benefit. The theatre was for many years the largest building in Bargoed with a capacity of around 2,000 seats, and as such was an important venue for community-wide events. There were few organisations and causes that did not benefit from Jackson-Withers' largesse. Major annual community events such as the Eisteddfod and Annual Ball were held there, as well as a myriad of concerts, meetings and social events. Miners' meetings were regularly hosted at the theatre – for example, in November 1909, following a miners' meeting the hall manager received a standing ovation when he gave all those attending half price tickets for that week's variety entertainment and films.<sup>41</sup> In June 1910, the New Hall was loaned to Bargoed miners for a mass meeting during a dispute over the use of defective lamps, the hall 'being kindly placed at the disposal of the workmen by Mr Jackson-Withers, the Workmen's Hall being in use by the cooperators'.<sup>42</sup> Local religious organisations also regularly used the hall. For example, in August 1910 the

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<sup>38</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 31<sup>st</sup> August 1911.

<sup>39</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 31<sup>st</sup> August 1911.

<sup>40</sup> Dai Smith, 'Tonypandy 1910: definitions of community', *Past and Present*, 87:1 (May 1980), pp.158-184.

<sup>41</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 4<sup>th</sup> November 1909.

<sup>42</sup> *Monmouth Guardian*, 5<sup>th</sup> July 1914.

hall was loaned to the Church of England Young Men's Society for a meeting<sup>43</sup> and there were frequent band concerts in support of the Salvation Army.<sup>44</sup> Jackson-Withers' generosity did not go unnoticed or unmentioned. When he made the hall available for the annual Eisteddfod during Easter Tuesday 1911, the *Bargoed Journal* pointed out that this 'represents a loss for Mr Jackson Withers as on holiday occasions he could make money'<sup>45</sup> and Mr W. B. Lloyd, chairman of Gelligaer council, paid tribute to Jackson-Withers at a council meeting for his 'kindness to Bargoed people in placing the hall at the disposal of various bodies'.<sup>46</sup>

Cinema proprietors also donated the proceeds of shows to charitable causes. To some extent they may have been following the local precedent set by working men's institutes whose welfare objectives led them to regularly gift an evening's takings to a local good cause. For example, the Empire Abertridwr run by the Windsor Colliery workmen, like many other working men's institutes, held regular benefit shows for a variety of causes including:-

*the widow and family of late Police Sergeant Samuel Lewis. The Windsor Male Voice Choir participated and over £50 in cash and £50 as a war bond were handed to Mrs Evans.*<sup>47</sup>

*to benefit two colliers who had been idle for some time due to ill health.*<sup>48</sup>

*for an ex-soldier who is commencing poultry farming in Devon having lost the sight of both eyes in France. A sad feature of this case is that Mr Williams had to go so far from home and friends in order to commence once again in life because he was unable to obtain a piece of ground in this locality. A disgrace to those who have land in the district.*<sup>49</sup>

Although theatre/cinema proprietors occasionally donated takings to individual causes - for example in April 1908 a concert was held in Bargoed New Hall for the family of a man who had been run over by a train at Bargoed station the

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<sup>43</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 18<sup>th</sup> August 1910.

<sup>44</sup> For example, Tredegar and Bargoed bands gave a concert in support of the Salvation Army on Sunday July 18<sup>th</sup> 1909, *Bargoed Journal*, 15<sup>th</sup> July 1909.

<sup>45</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 20<sup>th</sup> April 1911.

<sup>46</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 20<sup>th</sup> May 1909.

<sup>47</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 4<sup>th</sup> April 1918.

<sup>48</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1918.

<sup>49</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 31<sup>st</sup> October 1918.

previous year<sup>50</sup> -it was more usual for donations to be made to organised causes. As circumstances and priorities shifted, these donations contributed to a variety of causes including the development of local facilities (for example, Bargoed Cottage Hospital and the Working Men's Institute), mining disaster funds, (for example, the Senghenydd colliery disaster of 1913) and war-time charities (such as Blind Soldiers and Sailors and the reception of Belgian refugees).

Jackson-Withers served in World War One (his brother Alfred Withers moved from London to Bargoed to care-take the business during this time) and was a committed supporter of various war charities.<sup>51</sup> Bargoed New Hall (and other cinemas that were subsequently acquired by the Withers) was regularly lent out for war-time purposes – for example, for recruitment rallies and as a drill hall – and Jackson-Withers regularly hosted benefits events. In 1915 he addressed a large audience who had gathered at the New Hall to celebrate a Gelligaer borough-wide flag day dedicated to 'providing additional comforts for the Welsh soldiers'. He appealed to the audience 'to support the movement, and begged of them not to spend their money on alcoholic drinks, or even on chocolates, oranges or programmes, but to devote the money to purchasing flags from the young ladies in the hall'.<sup>52</sup> He also presided over a meeting at the Hall held to garner support for the establishment of a Bargoed branch of the Comrades of the Great War.<sup>53</sup> When rain interfered with peace celebrations in June 1919 he offered free films for children at the New Hall theatre and the Palace cinema (which he had by then acquired):-

*An extraordinary scene was witnessed on Monday. A large number of children assembled in the park for the intended holding of postponed sports but again the rain interfered. Suddenly a whisper went around that Mr A Jackson-Withers with his characteristic foresight had intimated he would give free entertainment of pictures at the Palace and New Hall. By spontaneous action on the part of some of the boys a procession was formed to march to the popular places of amusement, gathering in numbers as they proceeded. Hanbury Road, from one end to the other, was taken by children marching six abreast singing to their hearts content in anticipation of the free show.<sup>54</sup>*

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<sup>50</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 16<sup>th</sup> April 1908.

<sup>51</sup> When Jackson-Withers moved to Cardiff in c1921 he named his house *Deauville*, a Normandy seaside town where he is likely to have been billeted.

<sup>52</sup> *Monmouth Guardian*, 5<sup>th</sup> March 1915.

<sup>53</sup> *Monmouth Guardian*, 30<sup>th</sup> May 1919.

<sup>54</sup> *Monmouth Guardian*, 25<sup>th</sup> June 1919.



Musical causes were another of Jackson-Withers' favoured beneficiaries. As Andy Croll has commented, music was thought to be one of the most 'civilising of all pastimes'. Civic leaders made great play of music's ability to bring different social constituencies together and to unite them in harmony and also boost the status of the town.<sup>55</sup> For this reason actively supporting musical events and endeavour was one of most effective ways of demonstrating civic commitment. As Croll has written, part of the duties of the 'public man' involved supporting, and being seen to support musical organisations such as choirs and brass bands. He found there were no shortage of such figures in Merthyr, including solicitors, bank managers, newspaper editors and councillors,<sup>56</sup> and the same was true in Bargoed with Jackson-Withers very much at the forefront. As already stated, Jackson-Withers hosted Bargoed's Eisteddfod at the New Hall every year from 1909. The 1910 Eisteddfod, for example, was chaired by Walter Lewis, Rhymney Valley Miners' agent and Gelligaer UDC councillor and raised funds for the Workmen's Library and Institute (which opened in 1913).<sup>57</sup>

There was an expectation, encouraged by the local press, that communities had a duty to nurture the talent found within their ranks.<sup>58</sup> In May 1910 Jackson Withers held a Grand Benefit Entertainment to contribute towards a fund set up to establish a scholarship scheme for the musical protogee master Sidney Northcote who hailed from Bargoed. Master Northcote had won the National Eisteddfod at Llangollen in 1908 and held over twenty other prizes for his piano playing, although a reporter at a performance given by the young musician, who was only nine years old at the time, commented that 'the only pity in regard to the present performances was that the little chap could not touch the pedals with his feet and had simply to utilise his touch'.<sup>59</sup> Sidney Northcote played at the benefit concert with his brother Staffo who was a talented violinist. Jackson-Withers' contribution to the fund was an important one since the fund was in deficit and it was looking likely that a number of 'prominent men of the town' would be called upon to honour their guarantees to support the fund. Happily, the concert wiped out the deficit, the *Bargoed Journal*

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<sup>55</sup> Croll, *Civilising the Urban*, p.106.

<sup>56</sup> Croll, *Civilising the Urban*, p.119.

<sup>57</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1910.

<sup>58</sup> Croll, *Civilising the Urban*, pp.123-124.

<sup>59</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 5th November 1908.

commenting that ‘a better way of relieving those gentlemen of any financial liability could not be found’.<sup>60</sup> Jackson Withers was also a major sponsor of Bargoed Male Voice Choir, lending the New Hall to them for concerts on many occasions with the proceeds going to choir funds.<sup>61</sup>

However, Jackson-Withers’ largesse was not simply to curry favour with the civic elite for he was a genuine enthusiast of music and drama. He was the ‘heart and soul’ in the formation of a private operatic society for Bargoed. The society, which was formed in 1911, was not established ‘from any selfish motives’ since Jackson-Withers was to underwrite all financial risks and the proceeds were to go to charity.<sup>62</sup> The society was intended to bring musical gravitas to the town. The president was Viscount Tredegar and a number of professional singers were engaged to support the local amateurs. The society staged the *Pirates of Penzance* during coronation week in 1911, the *Bargoed Journal* reporting that Jackson-Withers had worked ‘indefatigably hard’ to make it a success.<sup>63</sup>

It is clear that Jackson-Withers was not unusual amongst his peers. Cinema proprietors and managers were renowned for their generosity towards local charitable causes, indeed there was often competition between them in terms of who could donate most. For example, when the Palace cinema in Bargoed made a generous contribution to the King Edward Memorial Fund in March 1911, Jackson-Withers offered to double it.<sup>64</sup> Although public halls and working men’s institutes had more clearly defined community roles, it was not unusual for commercial entertainment venues to offer more favourable terms when it came to hosting civic and charitable events. For example, the Bargoed and Gilfach Soldiers and Sailors Reception and Memorial Fund committee sent several letters of protest to the management committee of the working men’s institute following the doubling of the rental charges for their hall. In contrast the Hanbury cinema lent their hall free of charge for a Sunday evening concert by the Rhymney Ladies Choir and Jackson-Withers received a vote of thanks from the committee for making the New Hall available to the

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<sup>60</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 5<sup>th</sup> May 1910.

<sup>61</sup> For example, *Bargoed Journal* for 13<sup>th</sup> January 1910, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1910, 17<sup>th</sup> October 1912.

<sup>62</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 12<sup>th</sup> January 1911.

<sup>63</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 1<sup>st</sup> June 1911.

<sup>64</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1911.

committee at a significantly reduced rate for a 'Great Week' of fund raising events. The New Hall advertised and staffed the event and Jackson-Withers adjudicated the competitions. Victor Knowles, the 'popular manager' of the Hanbury cinema, also chaired a Sunday evening concert in aid of the charity.<sup>65</sup>

### **'A judicious blending of the educational and the entertaining'**

Another strategy of cinema proprietors and managers was to promote the educational and moral character of the films they showed. This was a particularly important tactic given the opposition that had developed in many local authority areas in relation to children's exposure to cinema and Sunday opening (described in Chapter Five). In 1918 the Kinematograph Year Book argues that 'shady subjects' were now less of an issue. 'We are convinced that there are few exhibitors who favour this class of picture, but even this minority must be educated up to better things. We need to ensure that no picture is shown that gives 'the goody goody fraternity the opportunity to point the finger of scorn'.<sup>66</sup> A handbook for cinema proprietors and managers recommends 'a judicious blending of the educational and the entertaining'<sup>67</sup> and encourages using the cinema opening ceremony as an 'occasion to press home the educational aspects of the kinematograph and the high class nature of the entertainment that will be provided'.<sup>68</sup> In July 1912, the New Tredegar Cinema was opened by Mr Forestier-Walker JP, nephew to Lord Tredegar and resident of the Rhymney Valley for some twenty years. Over five hundred invitations were sent out and local councillors, professionals and business-men were present. In his speech Forestier-Walker pointed out the educational and civilizing potential of film:-

*When I was a boy it was always the custom to look upon the hill districts as beyond the pale of civilization...Such a Cinema Theatre provided a class of instruction to be obtained from keeping the eyes open. It placed before them pictures of things from the making of motor cars and other things to the lives of great men like Napoleon. No one could doubt it must be instructive to both*

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<sup>65</sup> Bargoed and Gilfach Soldiers and Sailors Reception and Memorial Fund minutes 1918-1926 held at Bargoed Library. The fund closed in 1926 having funded the erection of a memorial in Trafalgar Square.

<sup>66</sup> Kinematograph Year Book, 1918

<sup>67</sup> Kinematograph Weekly, *How to run a Picture House: A Handbook for Proprietors, Managers and Exhibitors*, (London 1912), p. 61.

<sup>68</sup> Kinematograph Weekly, *How to run a Picture House*, p. 150

*the young and old. He supposed that doubtless there would be people who did not believe in cinemas. There were people who grumbled at anything and everything; but a properly managed cinema theatre was a source of instruction for in seeing things which were made to move and live, as it were, impressed the mind more than if read in a book.*

Mr Forestier-Walker requested that the cinema owners should not ‘pander to morbid tastes’ since there was often a tendency to ‘put scenes on the screen of blood curdling murders and no-one wanted to see the villain who killed his sweet-heart.’ Mr John Williams, on behalf of the directors, responded to reassure the audience that there would be nothing shown that was ‘inconsistent with high moral principles’ and the ceremony closed with the showing of films of the King and Queen’s visit to South Wales, the charge of the Light Brigade (as a tribute to Lord Tredegar who took part in the charge), a Spanish drama entitled *The Revolutionist* and two comic dramas.<sup>69</sup>

Colonel and Mrs Morgan Lindsay were due to open the Ystrad Mynach cinema in October 1912 but were unable to do so due to illness. Colonel Lindsay was a grandson of Lord Tredegar, a JP and a councillor with Caerphilly UDC. He and his family lived locally at Ystrad Fawr. In their absence a local doctor opened the cinema and read a letter from Mrs Morgan Lindsay in which she expressed her best wishes for the success of the hall which she was confident would be well conducted and which she hoped would prove a centre of artistic and moral culture. Before the formal opening of the cinema a suitably respectable cantata ‘Amos, the Cripple of Capernaum’ was performed before crowded audiences.<sup>70</sup>

It was crucial that cinema proprietors and managers did not alienate local civic leaders by showing films of questionable taste, especially given the strong Nonconformist presence in the region. In the early days of cinema, films with a religious/moral theme were a safe option, especially for Sunday shows. Examples of such morally up-lifting films included *The Power of the Cross*, *Quaker Girl*, *The Conversion* and *By the Cross*. When *The Power of the Cross* was shown at the New Hall in April 1908, the *Bargoed Journal* described it as ‘edifying and instructive without causing offence to any religious section and is a beautiful film and worthy of

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<sup>69</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 13<sup>th</sup> July 1912.

<sup>70</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 12<sup>th</sup> October 1912.

a visit from all classes of the community'.<sup>71</sup> Another film with a strong moral message *Where are my Children* received a similarly positive review from the *Merthyr Express*:-

*No lesson 'gets there' so thoroughly as by means of the silent picture, especially when the lesson is thoughtfully and intelligently portrayed, and its moral made the keynote of the whole performance. Such is the case with Where are my Children which has received the approval of the National Council of Public Morals. If you want to witness the most moral pictures of the day then visit the Park Cinema, Pontypridd.*<sup>72</sup>

The educational value of films was also promoted. Factual/news films made useful programme fillers, often portraying royal occasions and other historic events such as the Mauretania's voyage from New York to Fishguard in January 1911. Classic literature was also an important source of material. Indeed, the Kinematograph Exhibitors' Association argued that the increasing popularity of cinema was responsible for a boom rather than a decline in reading:-

*A curious fact was made known at the beginning of the year, namely, that the kinematograph fostered a taste for book reading. With the advent of 'Les Miserables', 'David Copperfield', 'Quo Vadis' and other films founded upon well known novels, the lucky publishers admitted that a tremendous demand had been created for their works... This seems to contradict the assertion so frequently made use of in the press and pulpit that the picture theatre had destroyed the utility of public libraries.*<sup>73</sup>

Books or book extracts were sometimes given out to audiences. For example, in June 1908 'every lady paying one shilling or more for admission' to the New Hall received a copy of Ouida's novel *Under the Two Flags*, which was that week being staged at the theatre.<sup>74</sup> Cinema proprietors attempted to simultaneously juggle the competing priorities of promoting the cosmopolitan nature of their entertainment and reassuring civic leaders that their material was above moral suspicion. Just as importantly they needed to make a profit and there were many occasions when a morally edifying programme may have satisfied the 'disciplining forces' but failed to bring in the crowds.

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<sup>71</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 16<sup>th</sup> April 1908.

<sup>72</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 17<sup>th</sup> January 1918.

<sup>73</sup> Kinematograph Exhibitors' Year Book, 1915.

<sup>74</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 25<sup>th</sup> June 1908. *Under Two Flags* was a best selling novel written in the late 1860s.

## Cinema as ‘national necessity’

The public role of cinema received a major boost during World War One. Cinema entrepreneurs promoted their patriotism and public spiritedness by showing a range of war related films including official war communications and war-themed dramas. War communications ranged across a spectrum of topics including recruitment, national service, war-time finance as well as ‘home-front’ issues such as fuel and food economy. Some communications were dramatized to hold an audience’s attention – for example, a film entitled *The Allotment Holders* appeared in many valleys cinemas in 1918, the *Monmouth Guardian* describing it as ‘dealing humorously with the subject of potato production’.<sup>75</sup> Another Ministry of Information film entitled *The Poet* ‘depicted a harassed poet whose bardic effusions were always rejected by editors and publishers and the piles of rejected manuscripts filled long rows of shelves. While the poet was in a despondent and suicidal mood, the wife came across an advertisement which stated that there was money in waste paper. The wife sold all the manuscripts and realized a handsome sum. And so the household was saved and they were “happy ever after” ie he ceased writing poetry’.<sup>76</sup>

Official war pictures were regularly shown – for example, as early as 1913 audiences were able to watch a film of German soldiers exercising in a school yard in Bouges, ‘happier than when facing Belgian guns and swords’<sup>77</sup> and in 1916 audiences viewed pictures from the Battle of the Somme and ‘the Gallant Deeds of the Rhondda Lads in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, Middlesex, London Scottish, Buffs, Bedfords etc.’<sup>78</sup> Many war-themed dramas and serials were also produced – for example, *A Child of War*, described as ‘very good indeed and gave an insight into the horrors of war and its attendant misery’.<sup>79</sup>

The Kinematograph Exhibitor’s Association took every opportunity to trumpet the industry’s war-time contribution in raising public morale and communicating

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<sup>75</sup> *Monmouth Guardian*, 26<sup>th</sup> April 1918.

<sup>76</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 10<sup>th</sup> August 1918.

<sup>77</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 27<sup>th</sup> August 1913.

<sup>78</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 7<sup>th</sup> September 1916.

<sup>79</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 27<sup>th</sup> August 1914.

nationally important information and the ‘enthusiastic way in which these duties have been taken up’ by the industry.<sup>80</sup> They believed that the authorities had at last recognized the power of the screen and its public amenity value. For example, the Kinematograph Year Book in 1919 wrote:-

*Perhaps no other form of exterior assistance has done so much towards helping the country and its allies to gain the victory as has the Kinema Trade. Not only in relation to direct war propaganda, but in the multi-various indirect ways in which the enlightenment of the people and the necessity of bringing facts home to them was so urgent, has the film performed a vital task.*

In reality, most films shown during war-time had no ostensible public service role, but cinema entrepreneurs were able to emphasise the contribution of the industry in keeping up public morale, and cinema attendance certainly boomed during war-time years. One local cinema advertisement stated that ‘good clean entertainments are not luxuries, they are national necessities and help to maintain the mental health of the country, which at the present is of vital importance’.<sup>81</sup> Cinema entrepreneurs were keen to personally align themselves with the war effort. We have already seen how generously Jackson –Withers contributed to war-time charities. He was also known to attend council meetings (when theatre/cinema licenses were being discussed) in army khakis no doubt to underline his patriotism and the fact he had served in the forces.<sup>82</sup>

However, the industry’s contribution to the war effort brought with it a problem that was identified as early as World War One and became amplified during the Second World War. That was that, having given their cooperation ‘loyally and almost universally’, they were being ‘dogged by every appeal secretary in the country and as a result the demands for free time have exceeded any practical man’s power to comply with’.

*...there are incessant appeals made upon the Trade for help in other directions which are outside its proper province, and resistance is difficult in view of the patriotic and benevolent spirit of the kinema man, as well as the obvious need for a policy which cements good relations with important civic authorities. Somewhere, however, a line must be drawn, and here exhibitors have been glad to have behind them an organization like the CEA. It is not so*

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<sup>80</sup> Kinematograph Exhibitors’ Association Year Book, 1918

<sup>81</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 6<sup>th</sup> December 1917.

<sup>82</sup> *Monmouth Guardian*, 10<sup>th</sup> August 1917.

*unpleasant to refuse a request when you are able to say you are bound by a branch resolution.*<sup>83</sup>

The ‘patriotic and benevolent’ cinema proprietors could not cope with the demand that they had helped to generate, pointing to an inherent weakness in the industry’s strategy for securing public approval. As we shall go on to see in Chapter Seven, the industry was intensely competitive and margins were generally tight in spite of a common belief that cinemas were ‘coining’ the profits. Although cinemas needed the support of civic leaders and the general public, any investment in securing this had to be carefully managed as over-generosity could very easily tip them into bankruptcy.

### **A personal touch**

Many cinema proprietors excelled at public relations and networking, especially if they were from a theatrical background. Albert Jackson-Withers, for example, had a flamboyant style, a genuine love of drama and music, in particular theatre, and frequently chaired and adjudicated social events at the New Hall. His nephew described him as ‘an irascible but humorous man’. ‘Why bother to be difficult’ he is reported as saying, ‘when with a little extra trouble you can be bloody impossible’.<sup>84</sup> In spite of his alleged cantankerousness, Jackson-Withers appears to have had a sound instinct for how to win over the civic elite and the wider public. The altercation with Gelligaer Rural District Council (and then Gelligaer Urban District Council) over the New Hall theatre’s right to sell alcohol, mentioned briefly in Chapter Five, highlights the level of support Jackson-Withers had managed to secure not only on the local council but within the local community more generally. For example, a petition of several hundred sent to the council in 1909 over the liquor license issue included ‘jewellers, bankers – bankers who were teetotalers – medical men, butchers and tradespeople of all descriptions’.<sup>85</sup> Understandably council members made it clear that they ‘held no brief for Jackson-Withers’ and that their position was not the result of any ‘wire pulling’, but there was nevertheless considerable praise for the contribution Jackson-Withers had made to the town.

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<sup>83</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors’ Association Year Book, 1941

<sup>84</sup> Timothy O’Sullivan, *Julian Hodge: A Biography* (London, 1981), p. 27.

<sup>85</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 25<sup>th</sup> February 1909.



Compared with the brewers and licensed houses of Bargoed that ‘did not contribute one iota’ and greeted any request for a subscription with some ‘paltry excuse’, Jackson-Withers had ‘supported all the institutions and was prepared to do everything possible in his power for the interest and welfare of the people of Bargoed’. He ‘brought actors and actresses to the area, and people of that class as a rule did not live sparingly and therefore spent money in the town’, he had ‘given to the Labour Party more than he had given to anyone else and to every denomination that had appealed to him’. He was described as a ‘considerable asset to the town’, a man they should ‘endeavor to help in his undertaking’.<sup>86</sup>

He was, indeed, helped in his undertaking as a full license was reinstated although objections were raised again in 1912 when a deputation of Bargoed Nonconformist ministers lobbied the council when the license came up for renewal. Jackson-Withers appeared in person to argue his case. He joked that the last time the objections had come from the devil (publicans) whilst this year they emanated from the divine. He reasoned that if the council refused a full license they would be giving public houses ‘an enormous whip hand’. On the casting vote of the Chairman, however, the council votes *not* to award a full license. Once again, there was an immediate response. The *Bargoed Journal* described the Council’s decision as a ‘snub’ and published a poem lamenting the closure of the theatre bar<sup>87</sup>:-

*One of our cherished and harmless little enjoyments,  
In infinite quietude and restfulness  
We could devour a hunch of bread with cheese and other accompaniments  
While the orchestra rendered life harmonious  
And led us to forget the woe and trials that beset our path  
But today despair grips us, for the bar is closed  
Theatre, but no bar,  
And no scotch for me  
And when I fain would seek for my three star  
They palm me off with tea.*

At the next council meeting, two delegations were received, one from the Free Church Council and the other comprising twenty-two tradespeople led by W. B. Lloyd (who had become a county councilor). W. B. Lloyd explained that he wasn’t

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<sup>86</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 25<sup>th</sup> February 1909.

<sup>87</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 7<sup>th</sup> March 1912.

there for Jackson-Withers' sake but to 'right an injustice to Bargoed and the inhabitants of Bargoed'. By removing the license they were 'casting an imputation against the character of the business and the work people of Bargoed'. When asked by a councilor why he had brought such a large delegation W.B. Lloyd replied that he had not brought them, they had wanted to attend to demonstrate their support for Jackson-Withers. When the Rev. J. P. Thompson, one of the Free Church Council delegates, claimed that he had heard that someone had got very drunk in the theatre bar, Withers denied this, arguing that the police made regular visits and that there had been no complaints. The accusation of drunkenness, in combination with the fact the Minister had only recently moved to Bargoed, swayed opinion in Jackson-Withers' favour. When a councilor remarked that they were more inclined to support the testimony of W. B. Lloyd who had lived in the parish for twenty years, than the word of a gentleman who had been there for just three months (albeit a church Minister), there were murmurs of assent.<sup>88</sup> The previous decision of the Council was rescinded and the full license restored. The *Bargoed Journal* remarked that 'it has been a case of grant the license, refuse the license, grant the license, refuse the license and finally grant the license – we are sure that Mr Jackson-Withers will conduct his bars in the most exemplary manner, such as he has always done in the past'.<sup>89</sup>

## Conclusion

Chapters Three to Six have shown that the period up to c1920 was characterized by a massive expansion in the cinema industry and often turbulent relationships with local 'disciplining forces'. The challenge for cinema entrepreneurs was to develop community-wide confidence in themselves, their product and the wider industry. Although there were a number of skirmishes over licensing issues in Bargoed, there can be little doubt that the personal approach adopted by Jackson-Withers and his active involvement in local civic life helped to build up support for him and his business. He personified his business and a key aspect of this persona was high profile loyalty to the town. However, it is also important to note that there were broader social, economic and cultural changes at work that facilitated the acceptance of

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<sup>88</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 12<sup>th</sup> March 1912.

<sup>89</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1912.

cinema. Nonconformism was losing much of its influence in civic life, although the issue of the Sunday opening of cinema, in particular, continued to ignite Nonconformist consciences for many years to come. There was also a strong public demand for films, as witnessed by the long queues outside cinemas and the petitioning of regulatory authorities that often followed the imposition of any restrictions. Regulators were usually elected councillors who were well aware that their opposition to film exhibition might well have an impact on their electoral fortunes. We have also seen how cinema (and its precursor, theatre) was viewed by many, including civic leaders, as an important addition to a town's repertoire of services, a sign of modernity and advancement, which was particularly important for a new town like Bargoed that was trying hard to establish its metropolitan credentials.

Indeed, cinema has been described as 'the mainland of modernity' during the pre-World War One period.<sup>90</sup> And yet, cinema's success lay in its ability to strike a balance between the thrillingly modern and the reassuringly familiar. We have seen in Chapter Three that early films bore many resemblances to earlier entertainment forms, and many film venues and entrepreneurs would have been familiar to audiences. Indeed, it was this familiarity, combined with the greater respectability of commercial leisure, that often undermined church/chapel opposition to cinema. When churches and chapels criticized cinema as a damaging distraction, they were often accused of hypocrisy since they themselves staged plays and concerts, sometimes on Sunday evenings and occasionally charging for entrance. Examples of church/chapel entertainments held during this period are numerous and include 'miscellaneous entertainment, including Welsh jigs' put on by the Calfaria Congregational Church in Bargoed,<sup>91</sup> 'a humorous play in aid of church funds' staged by Selon Chapel, Ystrad Mynach<sup>92</sup> and a 'pretty and interesting fairy operetta' put on by Bethan Presbyterian Church, Bargoed.<sup>93</sup>

These diversions drew criticism from more traditional church/chapel members and provided ammunition for supporters of cinema to highlight the double standards

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<sup>90</sup> Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby and Philippe Meers (eds.), *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: New perspectives on European cinema history* (London and New York, 2012), p.10.

<sup>91</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 10<sup>th</sup> March 1928.

<sup>92</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 11<sup>th</sup> February 1928.

<sup>93</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 14<sup>th</sup> April 1928.

applied by many churches/chapels. For example, a letter published in the *Merthyr Express* criticized local churches for hosting ‘theatrical entertainments...to further the work of God’, arguing that it was like ‘shaking hands with the devil and telling him he is a good fellow’.<sup>94</sup> The *Bargoed Journal* suggested that if churches and chapels continued to charge for entrance to concerts, they should be ‘properly rated.’<sup>95</sup> By 1920, religious opposition to cinema per se was much diminished, and what eventually emerged was very much a ‘set piece battle’ between church/chapel and cinema proprietors focusing on the issue of Sunday observance.

In conclusion, although the civic engagement techniques employed by cinema proprietors almost certainly eased the assimilation of cinema, it is important to place these daily interactions within the context of prevailing socio-economic conditions. The coal industry driven economic boom and the experiences of World War One brought in their wake a host of social, political and cultural changes, and it was these broader shifts that had most impact on cinema’s reception. By the 1920s, cinema had become an accepted part of the leisure scene and there was less need for cinema proprietors to adopt a personal approach to business promotion. As we shall see in Chapter Seven, their main challenge during the inter-war years became one of economic survival.

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<sup>94</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 20<sup>th</sup> April 1907.

<sup>95</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 9<sup>th</sup> January 1908.

## Chapter Seven

### The ‘coining of money?’: the challenges and opportunities of the inter-war years<sup>1</sup>

*‘Coining’ would have been a better word than minting! ...Yet it seems to me indeed at times that all this present commercial civilization is no more than my poor uncle’s career writ large, a swelling, thinning bubble of assurances; that its arithmetic is just as unsound, its dividends as ill-advised, its ultimate aim as vague and forgotten.’*

H. G. Wells, Tono-Bungay (1904)

The inter-war years (the 1930s in particular) are described as a ‘golden age’ of cinema by many commentators,<sup>2</sup> and yet during this period the cinema industry in the south Wales valleys experienced an economically turbulent time. Rather than ‘coining money’, many cinema proprietors went out of business, cinemas changed hands with bewildering frequency and there was very little new cinema provision. In sharp contrast, many areas of the United Kingdom witnessed the construction of a new generation of ‘super-cinemas’, imposing, state-of-the art venues designed to expand the cinema-going market by attracting up-market and ‘respectable’ audiences.

Nicolas Hiley has identified two main patterns of cinema consumption over the period 1920 to the 1940s.<sup>3</sup> Initially cinemas were fashioned from existing buildings, programmes comprised a mixture of short silent films often interspersed with live acts, admission was cheap and audiences largely working class. During the 1930s Hiley argues that a new style of consumption developed with large-scale, up-market auditoria, longer film programmes often consisting of two feature films with sound and a more socially diverse (and orderly) audience. Although Hiley concedes that there was a transition from one form of consumption to the other, his analysis is that over a period of ten or so years the new style of consumption had fairly comprehensively replaced the old. However, as Miskell has pointed out, this was most certainly not the case in Wales where ‘older patterns of film-going did not just persist,

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<sup>1</sup> The Kinematograph Exhibitors Association (KEA) claimed that the phrase ‘coining of money’ appeared in many ‘glowing prospectuses’ issued by entrepreneurs who were keen to make money out of the industry, Kinematograph Exhibitors’ Association Year Book, 1916.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939* (London, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Hiley, “‘Let’s go to the pictures’: the British cinema audience in the 1920s and 1930s.” *Journal of Popular British Cinema*, 2 (1999), pp. 39-53.

they remained the norm',<sup>4</sup> although cinema proprietors continued to endeavor to distinguish their venues. Miskell states that 'in no part of Britain were there fewer 'dream palaces' constructed in the 1930s than in Wales.'<sup>5</sup> For example, during the whole of the inter-war period only four modern cinemas were opened in the whole of Monmouthshire, - in Blackwood, Ebbw Vale, Newport and Chepstow.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, Wales had the largest proportion of small cinemas than any other region in the United Kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

The situation in many other urban areas of the UK could not have been more different. From the late 1920s, the Cinematograph (previously spelt Kinematograph) Exhibitors' Association (CEA) was trumpeting the 'remarkable number of new theatres' that were springing up across the country. 'Suburban and provincial halls are being designed with the same lavish schemes as those in the West End', with 'beautiful architecture'... 'greater seating capacity' and the 'most wonderful organs in the world'.<sup>8</sup> Until the mid 1930s the trade body applauded the 'unparalleled expansion in the number of cinemas' and the creation of 'new houses that are abject lessons in construction, decoration and appointment'.<sup>9</sup> This was the period that Birmingham entrepreneur Oscar Deutsch launched the Odeon circuit which expanded to include almost 300 modernistic cinemas by the end of the 1930s (but only six in Wales). However, the jubilant tone was increasingly under-scored by an anxiety that the industry was over-stretching itself. In 1935 the CEA published a pamphlet entitled *Are there too many cinemas?: The Menace of Overbuilding in the Film Industry*.<sup>10</sup> The pamphlet was written by Sam Eckman Junior, Managing Director of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures Ltd and was based on a lecture he had given to the CEA summer conference in June 1934. Eckman was asked to report on the situation

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits: A Social History of the Cinema in Wales, 1918-1951* (Cardiff, 2006), p.30.

<sup>5</sup> Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*, p.30.

<sup>6</sup> Phillip Wakely, *Spellbound in Darkness: The Cinema in Monmouthshire*, unpublished paper, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> In 1934, 86% of venues had less than 1,000 seats compared with a UK average of 72%, S. Rowson, 'A statistical survey of the cinema industry in Great Britain in 1934', quoted by Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*, p.37.

<sup>8</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1929

<sup>9</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1934

<sup>10</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association, *Are there too many cinemas?: The Menace of Overbuilding in the Film Industry* (London, 1935).

in America so that ‘British trade could profit by the mistakes made on the other side of the Atlantic’.

In America there had been a ‘theatre building orgy’ due to ‘producers’ invasion into exhibition’ and easy access to money prior to the financial crash of 1929. Eckman used the example of Philadelphia, ‘one of the most English cities of America’ to illustrate the problem. He wrote that ‘1928-9 had seen theatres springing like mushrooms all around the town. Real estate promoters were promoting, stock was being floated, publicly and privately, and the public was buying – hook, line and sinker’. The stock market crash had left a ‘devastating imprint’, theatres were losing hundreds and thousands per week, many important theatres were under court administration and investors had lost money. Although the situation was not nearly as severe in Great Britain, Eckman concluded that ‘the signs of over-building, over-reaching, over-expansion are as unmistakable as the results are inevitable’. Although the pamphlet is alarmist in tone, there was undoubtedly a growing anxiety in the British exhibition industry that the latest super-charged phase of expansion might make some older-style cinemas redundant. As the foreword to the pamphlet stated ‘a new cinema does not generally increase the cinema patronage by a single person. The same amount of business is spread over a larger number of cinemas’.

Whilst the south Wales valleys did not experience the same super-cinema building mania, and cinemas in the region were smaller than average, there was no shortage of provision. Indeed, generous pre World War One provision of small-scale venues, many of them conversions of existing buildings, meant that south Wales had more cinema seats per person than average - 7.6 people (aged 15 plus) per cinema seat in 1934 compared with a UK average figure of 8.9.<sup>11</sup> From its earliest days film exhibition in the south Wales valleys was a competitive business and profit margins were frequently slight. As we have seen in Chapter Four, behind the public bonhomie often lay a sharp competitiveness. Cinemas vied with each other using increasingly innovative methods to increase their market share; working men’s institutes and public halls lobbied regulatory authorities to oppose the opening of privately funded ventures often within yards of their own front door; and permanent venues, whether

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<sup>11</sup> S. Rowson, *A statistical survey of the cinema industry in Great Britain in 1934*, as reported in the *Cinematograph Year Book*, 1936.

public or private, were united in their opposition to travelling theatres and cinemas which had considerably lower overhead costs.

The economic depression of the 1920s and 1930s, that had such a devastating impact on south Wales valleys communities, intensified this competition as cinema venues vied with each other, as well as other forms of entertainment, to attract the limited amount of 'spare cash' that was in circulation. Prior to 1920, although competition between cinemas was lively, south Wales communities were relatively affluent and demand for leisure was strong. From this position of boom, the inter-war years was a period that 'truly fits the description of "economic decline".<sup>12</sup> Over-dependence on a limited number of heavy industries, in particular coal, made the region economically vulnerable when export markets went into decline. The consequently high levels of unemployment, bread-line incomes of many households and the out-migration of many people, in particular the young and fit, had a serious impact on local trade including the economic fortunes of cinemas. The unemployment rate in Wales was consistently higher than for any other area of Britain between 1928 and 1939, never below 20% and as high as 38%.<sup>13</sup> However, these national averages mask significant local differences. The counties of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire had the highest levels of unemployment, recording levels of 40% and 42% respectively in 1932. Some local authority areas experienced even higher rates. For example, in September 1936, 61% of Merthyr Tydfil's insured population was out of work. Unemployment was also prolonged. In June 1938 a quarter of all unemployed workers in Wales had been out of work for more than a year causing considerable economic distress including the erosion of savings, growing indebtedness and low standards of living. The bleak economic climate led to mass out-migration from Wales, in particular from the south Wales valleys. It is estimated that some 440,000 people left Wales between 1921 and 1938, with the counties of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire accounting for over 85% of this exodus.<sup>14</sup> Inevitably it was largely

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<sup>12</sup> Dennis Thomas, 'Economic Decline' in Trevor Herbert and Gareth Elwyn Jones (eds.) *Wales Between The Wars* (Cardiff, 1988)

<sup>13</sup> Table included in Thomas, 'Economic Decline', p. 31, based on Table 8, M. P. Fogarty, *Prospects of the Industrial Areas of Great Britain* (London, 1945)

<sup>14</sup> Table included in Thomas, 'Economic Decline', p. 32. The data are drawn from Welsh Reconstruction Advisory Council, *First Interim Report, Office of the Minister of Reconstruction*, H.M.S.O. 1944. Appendix 1, p.12



the ‘most active and adaptable element of the population as well as the most skilled or potentially skilled who tended to migrate’.<sup>15</sup>

The population loss led to a reduction in local government revenue from rates and Government grants, and had broader consequences for the economic and social vitality of the region. In October 1936, Bargoed and District Chamber of Trade wrote to Gelligaer UDC regarding ‘the question of the exodus of young people and families from south Wales and the Rhymney Valley in particular and asking if the council would appoint a deputation to wait upon the proper authorities to consider the matter’. Local government impotency in the face of such deeply rooted economic problems is indicated by the council’s response that ‘the clerk reply to the effect that the council are prepared to consider any suggestion which the chamber wish to make’.<sup>16</sup>

The decrease in the area’s purchasing power, at individual and corporate levels, had major social and economic repercussions. Although demand for cinema-going continued at pre World War One levels, the economic depression meant that cinema proprietors could not increase their prices in line with inflation and to cover the costs of capital works required by technological advances and an increasingly stringent regulatory framework. In an already competitive leisure market this led to the squeezing of profit margins to such an extent that many businesses struggled to survive.

This chapter describes the competitive leisure market within which cinemas operated during the interwar years, and the strategies employed by cinema proprietors to increase their market share in a difficult economic environment. It examines the economic stress experienced by the industry as revenue costs rose relentlessly and demands for capital improvements increased whilst the ability to make compensatory increases in admission charges was severely constrained. The chapter describes the impact on business longevity and turnover, including how the large number of business failures during the period opened up opportunities for the consolidation of local and regional cinema circuits. The Withers’ business not only survived this challenging period, it took advantage of the availability of cinemas at ‘knock-down’ prices to build up a circuit of some thirty cinemas. Finally, the chapter examines how

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<sup>15</sup>Thomas, ‘Economic Decline’, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup>Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/32.

this latest phase of cinema exhibition history in the south Wales valleys transformed how cinema proprietors engaged with local civic leaders and the wider public. Whilst the pre 1920 period was characterized by active involvement in the civic project and generous charitable contributions, during the inter-war period charitable contributions were more modest and focused on relieving local distress whilst relationships with civic leaders became more remote as local government became a more complex and professional business.

### **Let us entertain you**

Whilst prior to 1920, it was pre-existing theatres and public halls that raised objections to the entry to the market of a new generation of purpose-built cinemas (as described in Chapter Four), the 1920s and 1930s saw a turning of the competitive tables. Many theatres and public halls switched to full time film exhibition and purpose built cinemas found their own operations under threat. The Merthyr Electric Theatre, for example, complained to the local rating authority that it was now in competition with four cinemas, including the Theatre Royal that ‘used to run dramas but now ran pictures’. The cinema had been forced to reduce its prices in order to compete with the theatre which had the competitive edge because of its large capacity hall.<sup>17</sup> Working men’s institutes and public halls had the additional advantage of not being liable to pay entertainment tax or income tax. The New Hall Theatre, Bargoed did not switch to full time film exhibition until the late 1940s although plays were staged only occasionally from the late 1920s. However, by 1920 the Withers brothers owned all three film venues in Bargoed and so were able to manage them cooperatively so as to minimize competition.

Most cinema venues, whether public or private, were united in their opposition to the licensing of travelling shows on the basis that they had an unfair advantage in not paying rates. For example, in July 1910, Jackson-Withers wrote to Gelligaer Urban District Council (UDC) to complain about Dooner’s Bioscope show that was located in a temporary building at Tirphil near Bargoed. He pointed out that whilst he was paying ‘heavy rates’, Dooner was paying none and consequently was ‘enabled to

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<sup>17</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 1<sup>st</sup> March 1924.

charge lower fees' which meant that these 'indiscriminate licenses were taking away the living of ratepayers'. Councillors' sympathies leaned towards Jackson-Withers who was described as a 'permanent institution in Bargoed' compared with Dooner who was of the 'itinerant class'. The chairman concluded that it was 'not fair to men like Mr Withers to allow some travelling dramatic performance to come in under cheaper conditions' and the council voted for 'Dooner's to be put on the same terms as Mr Jackson Withers'.<sup>18</sup> However, it appears the inequality persisted as in February 1912 Jackson-Withers' solicitor appeared before the Merthyr Union Assessment Committee to complain about Gelligaer parish's valuation list. Certain 'places of entertainment', more specifically Dooner's bioscope at Tirphil and Hagggar's theatre at Pontlottyn, were not included in the list and so did not pay rates. Although Jackson-Withers was not seeking monopoly and had 'no fear of competition' the current situation, whereby he paid £360 a year in rates for the New Hall, Bargoed and his competitors paid none, was clearly unfair. He argued that these 'itinerant' shows were in fact semi-permanent, thriving businesses. 'Mr Danter's theatre was situated in the midst of a large population, had accommodation for 500 people and there was about a thousand pounds worth of machinery there'. 'Mr Hagggar's theatre had been there a year or two and was a valuable property situated in the midst of a populous district. It was opened daily, sometimes twice daily, and no doubt did a large business'. The Committee agreed to ask Gelligaer Council to look into the matter,<sup>19</sup> and as a consequence all cinemas and theatres, whether portable or permanent, were assessed for rates according to their seating capacity.

Not only were cinemas in competition with each other, they also vied with a host of other social and leisure pursuits that continued to proliferate in the south Wales valleys in spite of the depression of the 1920s and 1930s. A number of historians have drawn attention to the populist music culture, linked to non-conformism, which characterized nineteenth century Wales. For example, Peter Stead writes that 'to a unique degree, that distinctive Welsh culture of the nineteenth century owed its identity to the sheer pleasure which ordinary people took in

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<sup>18</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 9<sup>th</sup> July 1910.

<sup>19</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1912.

performing and listening to music, and that applied especially to choral music'.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Gareth Williams has argued that collective music making occupied a significant place in the lives of many of Welsh people.<sup>21</sup> Churches, chapels and major employers all had their own choirs and frequently put on concerts and cantatas.

By the early twentieth century, leisure opportunities had expanded to include novelties such as skating, dancing and amateur dramatics. Peter Stead writes that 'Edwardian Wales was a busy and sophisticated society and its citizens had plenty of choice'. In February 1909, just a year after the New Hall theatre opened its doors, part of the building was leased out as a billiard hall, and just a few months later a skating rink opened in the town.<sup>22</sup>

The inter-war years also saw a great mushrooming of amateur theatricals. The introduction of the 'drama week', whereby several amateur dramatic groups competed for prizes, satisfied the valleys' appetite for a competitive edge. The *Merthyr Express* commented in 1927 on the 'growing popularity of what has come to be known as "Drama Week...For a whole week packed audiences follow with intense interest and intelligence the production of dramas of high class merit, not the blood curdling trashy stuff that formerly drew crowds to wooden "gaffs" in provincial towns and villages. Education has resulted in improving the literary tastes of our young people and they demand something of a much higher standard'.<sup>23</sup> Drama weeks were held in many south Wales towns including Dowlais, Tredegar and Rhymney, and the adjudications were written up in considerable detail in local newspapers. Although promoted as culturally elevating, competition could be ruthless. For example, the adjudication of the fifth Dowlais drama week held in October 1926 for the benefit of the Dowlais and Penyarden Nursing Association caused a storm of protest.<sup>24</sup> The adjudicator, Professor W. J. Gruffydd, a professor of Welsh language at Cardiff University, came in for harsh criticism. One letter to the local newspaper stated that

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Stead, 'Amateurs and Professionals in the Cultures of Wales', in *Politics and Society in Wales, 1840-1922: Essays in honour of Ieuan Gwynedd Jones* (Cardiff, 1988).

<sup>21</sup> Gareth Williams, "'How's the tenors in Dowlais?'" Hegemony, Harmony and Popular Culture in England and Wales 1600 – 1900', *Llafur* 5.1 (1998) and *Do you hear the people sing?: The Male Voice Choirs of Wales* (Llandysul, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 11<sup>th</sup> February and 27<sup>th</sup> May 1909.

<sup>23</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1927.

<sup>24</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 16<sup>th</sup> October 1926.

the adjudication was ‘the most unpopular, the most biased, that was ever given at the climax of such a wonderful week’.<sup>25</sup> Another reader wrote that although the professor’s Welsh language gifts were remarkable, he was not equipped to be a dramatic adjudicator and that as a consequence of his ill-informed judgments, ‘some artistes will have nothing further to do with competitions’.<sup>26</sup> The following year, Mr Percy Allen, ‘eminent author, producer, lecturer and dramatic critic for American and London dailies’ adjudicated, the *Merthyr Express* commenting that the presence of Mr Allen ‘assured them on this occasion of a cultured, technical and unbiased adjudication’.<sup>27</sup> There was something of a tradition in Wales in relation to fraught adjudications. Choral competitions, in particular, were an ‘outlet for vigorous rivalry’.<sup>28</sup> Peter Stead describes how the scenes that accompanied adjudications were often more enthralling than the performances and sometimes included boot and egg throwing, one adjudicator describing how his hat had been knocked off and he had escaped only ‘with great difficulty’.<sup>29</sup>

The 1920s also saw a proliferation in the number of jazz bands, the *Merthyr Express* estimating that there were some three hundred in the south Wales valleys by 1926.<sup>30</sup> A cup final in October of that year held in Caerphilly attracted over fifty bands and with each band including some forty performers this meant that ‘there was a total of over 2,000 jazzers in the procession’. The local newspaper pointed out that ‘the bands are composed exclusively of men and women on strike, who have travelled some distance to attend’ and poses the question ‘how do they do it?’<sup>31</sup> Once again, a hard-edged competitiveness was a feature of the pastime. A jazz competition held at Pontllytyn in 1927 resulted in a souring of relations between competing bands. A ‘mischievous rumour’ was circulated that reed instruments were banned from the competition and as a consequence four bands from Tredegar withdrew and returned home. A deputation from Pontllytyn Entertainments Committee went to Tredegar to make peace but ‘three of the four conductors would not meet or discuss anything with

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<sup>25</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1926.

<sup>26</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 16<sup>th</sup> October 1926.

<sup>27</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 15<sup>th</sup> October 1927.

<sup>28</sup> Gareth Williams, ‘“How’s the tenors in Dowlais?” Hegemony, Harmony and Popular Culture in England and Wales 1600–1900’, *Llafur* 5.1 (1998)

<sup>29</sup> Peter Stead, ‘Amateurs and Professionals in the Cultures of Wales’, in *Politics and Society in Wales, 1840-1922: Essays in honour of Ieuan Gwynedd Jones* (Cardiff, 1988).

<sup>30</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1926.

<sup>31</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1926.

anyone from Pontlottyn'. The *Merthyr Express* reported that it had also been rumoured that the secretary of the committee had guaranteed the Penydarren Pierotts the first prize. The committee strenuously denied this claiming 'this band did win the first prize, but fairly, solely on their merit'. 'Rumours of this kind do a great deal of harm and place the Committee in an invidious position'.<sup>32</sup>

The period also witnessed a 'dancing epidemic' across Wales. Dedicated dance halls were created, for example the Café Ballroom at the New Hall Theatre was opened in 1919, and applications to use public halls for dancing were 'so numerous, it was impossible to accommodate all parties'.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the entrepreneurial stampede was akin to the cinema building frenzy of some twenty years earlier. Pincombe writes that 'the absence of chains up until the late 1950s and early 1960s allowed for a healthy competition as the enterprising stepped in'. He describes how dance venues were provided by a motley collection of entrepreneurs, including 'independent entrepreneurs and impresarios, hoteliers, small companies, rabis and priests, municipal authorities and the odd enterprising individual'.<sup>34</sup> Many of these 'amateur' incursions into the market by-passed licensing laws by describing their dances as 'classes', a practice heavily criticized by specialist dance halls, such as the Café Ballroom at Bargoed and the Palais de Danse at Pontypridd. In April 1926, for example, the attention of Pontypridd magistrates was drawn to the many unlicensed halls and clubs which purported to be dancing classes but were open every night of the week some charging just 6d for entrance. The magistrates had imposed additional license conditions (for example, closing by 10.30pm) and licensed halls argued that unlicensed premises should be brought under the jurisdiction of the bench since they otherwise had an unfair competitive advantage.<sup>35</sup>

Twice weekly dances were an important source of income for Bargoed Institute throughout the 1920s and 1930s, with each dance typically contributing around £4 -£5 to Institute funds.<sup>36</sup> In addition to regular weekly dances, the Institute

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<sup>32</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 15th October 1927.

<sup>33</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 25<sup>th</sup> September 1926.

<sup>34</sup> Ian Pincombe, 'Utility Music for Spontaneous Happiness?: Dance bands and the dance halls in post-war south Wales', *Llafur*, 11:2 (2013), pp. 94-118.

<sup>35</sup> *Caerphilly Journal*, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1926.

<sup>36</sup> Bargoed and District Workmen's Library and Institute minutes, 1908-1967, South Wales Coalfield Collection, Swansea University, SWCC:MNA/1/4.

also ran special dances, such as a Fancy Dress Masquerade Ball in February 1926 that involved the judges wearing fancy dress masks whilst circulating amongst the dancers searching for the ‘best blended pair’.<sup>37</sup> The Institute also rented out the hall to a multitude of local groups for their own dances that were usually aimed at fund raising. The *Caerphilly Journal* commented that ‘there is very good reason for organizing dances for charitable purposes. It is no use organizing anything that the people will not buy tickets for. Lectures are not particularly popular today – perhaps they never were. And it would never do to go back to the magic lantern entertainment’.<sup>38</sup> Such was the popularity of dancing that the Institute established a Dance Committee to manage its busy schedule.

Many of these social activities were aimed at relieving local distress. When Bargoed Institute’s contribution of £100 a month from reserves to the local Canteen Fund was deemed illegal in August 1926, some three months after the coal stoppage in the south Wales valleys had commenced, the Institute allowed the local Canteen Fund to use the hall free of charge for two or three evenings a week in order to raise funds.<sup>39</sup> This was a major concession on the part of the Institute which had previously closely managed the letting of rooms and strictly adhered to its schedule of rental charges however worthy the cause. The second half of 1926 consequently saw a blossoming of social events aimed at fund raising with amateur choirs, bands and dramatic societies kept particularly busy. The *Merthyr Express* commented that Bargoed had been ‘visited during the strike by innumerable amateur variety companies’, and attendance at some occasions had suffered because of clashing events.<sup>40</sup> For example, a concert by New Tredegar Choral society held in Bargoed in August 1926 in aid of the Children’s Boot Fund was poorly attended due to another concert being held in the town on the same night in aid of the Canteen Fund, the presiding officer regretting that ‘there was a clashing of interests as both concerts were in a good cause’.<sup>41</sup> Just a few weeks later the Gelligaer Distress Fund was

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<sup>37</sup> Bargoed and District Workmen’s Library and Institute minutes, February 11<sup>th</sup> 1926, South Wales Coalfield Collection, Swansea University, SWCC:MNA/1/4.

<sup>38</sup> *Caerphilly Journal*, 30<sup>th</sup> January 1932.

<sup>39</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 11<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> September 1926.

<sup>40</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 11<sup>th</sup> September 1926.

<sup>41</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 4<sup>th</sup> September 1926.

obliged to postpone its 'sports and carnival efforts' in the face of 'competitive events of a like nature in the locality'.<sup>42</sup>

The relative vitality of the social scene (in spite of prevailing economic hardships) is illustrated by the number of activities held during just one week in Bargoed during September 1926. At Bargoed Institute alone there were three concerts, two short plays, a dance and a combined whist drive and dance, as well as the usual activities of billiards, snooker, table tennis, draughts and chess. In addition to this lively mix, there was a boxing tournament staged by the New Hall theatre in aid of the Canteen Fund, a weekly meeting of the Anford Social Club, various church gatherings as well as the commercial offerings of the New Hall theatre, Palace and Hanbury cinemas. By November 1927, some eighteen months after it had been set up, the Bargoed Canteen Fund had raised £2,940 (£160,000 at today's values).<sup>43</sup> A cursory review of local newspapers also reveals a host of local societies, including those dedicated to homing pigeons, caged bird and poultry keeping (not in combination!), allotment holding, air-rifle firing, operatic singing and rambling – as well as sporting activities such as bowls, soccer, rugby, tennis and cycling.

It is little wonder then that the cinema exhibitors' trade body, the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association (CEA), lamented that 'competition from other forms of amusement is more year on year and the attention and spare cash of the public is catered for as never before'. Peter Stead has argued that 'in general, all the various cultural activities existed alongside each other in a carefully regulated and finely balanced equilibrium'.<sup>44</sup> Although it is certainly the case that multi-various leisure opportunities were available during the inter-war years, the situation was far from being a stable, mutually supportive one. Entertainment forms, amateur as well as professional, were often in competition with each other and more traditional activities jostled with new leisure fads. Cinema proprietors faced difficult market conditions; business costs had increased significantly, they were often in competition with other cinemas as well as other leisure activities and the depression meant there was little scope for them to increase prices.

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<sup>42</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 25<sup>th</sup> September 1926.

<sup>43</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1927.

<sup>44</sup> Peter Stead, 'Amateurs and Professionals in the Cultures of Wales,' in *Politics and Society in Wales, 1840-1922: Essays in honour of Ieuan Gwynedd Jones* (Cardiff, 1988).



## Guile and gimmickry - gaining the competitive edge

In these difficult market conditions, cinema proprietors went to considerable lengths to steal a march on their competitors. A guide on how to run a picture-theatre, published by the *Kinematograph Weekly*, included advice on a wide array of topics from site selection and building design to advertising and promotion.<sup>45</sup> One of the guide's strongest messages was that proprietors needed to keep their eye on the competition and pay close attention to the needs of an often capricious audience. Safety was essential, comfort highly desirable, but the ambitious proprietor aimed for luxury. In terms of safety, the guide says 'there are still a great many showmen who, incredible as it may seem in this enlightened day, still have no artificial means of ventilating their theatres' and relied on simple electric fans. As a consequence 'the tiny germs of ravaging diseases, in millions to the square inch, might remain quiescent, but the 'breeze' from the electric fan sets them agog like sprightly maidens at a fair, only instead of being hilarious and harmless, they are exceedingly angry and dangerous'.<sup>46</sup> However, safety and function were only part of the requirement. When the Palace cinema, Bargoed advertised its new ventilating system during the summer months of 1911 it emphasized the novelty of a 'patent spray always in use, which wafts a fine mist composed of delicate perfumes over the heads of the people'.<sup>47</sup> It was essential for the cinema-going experience to have luxurious touches. The guide favours carpet over linoleum as a floor covering since 'there is something in the feel of a velvet pile that sub-consciously suggests and conveys a sense of luxury'.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, proprietors are advised to 'on no account omit to have a few mirrors at convenient points – this is a kindly consideration which always pleases the ladies and enables them to adjust their headgear correctly'.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *Kinematograph Weekly, How to run a Picture Theatre: A Handbook for Proprietors, Managers and Exhibitors* (London, 1912).

<sup>46</sup> *Kinematograph Weekly, How to run a Picture Theatre*, p. 26.

<sup>47</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 17<sup>th</sup> August 1911.

<sup>48</sup> *Kinematograph Weekly, How to run a Picture Theatre*, p. 18.

<sup>49</sup> *Kinematograph Weekly, How to run a Picture Theatre*, p. 18.

The importance of creating an impression of opulence meant that there was pressure on cinemas to periodically up-grade their premises. For example, in November 1912 the New Hall theatre publicised its installation of ‘additional plush seats in the stalls and better seating accommodation in the pits’<sup>50</sup> and in 1919 extended its ‘offer’ to customers by opening ‘palatial tea and coffee rooms in the basement’.<sup>51</sup> Cinemas also strove to make a visit to their venues as stress-free as possible. Some stored bikes free of charge,<sup>52</sup> and Jackson-Withers arranged for special trains to coincide with the start and finish times of his shows. For example, ‘a special train from Rhymney to Bargoed was arranged in connection with the performance of a *Royal Divorce* which has been run this week with so much success. It leaves Rhymney at 7pm stopping at all stations and returns from Bargoed at 10.30pm’.<sup>53</sup> Jackson-Withers had succeeded where the local council had failed. Gelligaer Council had for a number of years sought to influence the local train timetable.<sup>54</sup> He also installed an automated signal system in the New Hall to notify the audience of when trains were due to arrive at the local station.<sup>55</sup> Cinema proprietors and managers were also astute at market segmentation, adjusting their programme timings and prices to suit specific groups – for example, morning performances for night workers, and pensioners admitted free of charge during week-day afternoons on show of their pension cards.

The guide for cinema proprietors and managers devotes considerable space to advertising and promotion. Amongst other attention grabbing tactics, it discusses posters and hoardings, give-aways, competitions and local topical films. One ‘good dodge’ it described as having seen carried out in practice was to ‘throw or give away small portions of tweed which bear a label such as “this piece of cloth was torn from the trousers of a man trying to get into X pictures last night”’.<sup>56</sup> It also recommended linking promotional material to an important film being shown. A female cinema proprietor, interviewed by Audrey Field, described the lengths she and her family

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<sup>50</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 14<sup>th</sup> November 1912.

<sup>51</sup> *Monmouth Guardian*, 28<sup>th</sup> November 1919.

<sup>52</sup> For example, the Theatre Royal, Merthyr whilst under the management of Jackson-Withers, *Merthyr Express*, 13<sup>th</sup> August 1910.

<sup>53</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 13<sup>th</sup> April 1911. Special trains, arranged by Jackson-Withers, ran into the 1920s.

<sup>54</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/4.

<sup>55</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 9<sup>th</sup> September 1909.

<sup>56</sup> *How to run a Picture Theatre: A Handbook for Proprietors, Managers and Exhibitors*, Kinematograph Weekly, London, first edition 1912, second edition 1913.

went to in order to gain an edge on the local competition.<sup>57</sup> Once when a circus film was playing she had wanted to hire an elephant but that would have cost £10 a day so she settled on a camel. However, ‘the camel sat down in the middle of the high street and wouldn’t budge for a long time. When he did, he raided a greengrocer’s shop and then scared a milkman’s horse so that the horse went dashing away upsetting the milk and causing an uproar. Writs were served right, left and centre’. However she remembers the incident fondly, claiming that ‘it was even fun at the time’.

The guide recommends running competitions ideally tied into the theme of a particular film. For example, during September 1915 several local cinemas, including the Palace and Hanbury cinemas in Bargoed, hosted Charlie Chaplin look-a-like competitions to coincide with the showing of the film *The Tramp*,<sup>58</sup> and in July 1917 the Workmen’s Hall cinema in New Tredegar hosted a baby show where seventy-five babies were ‘exhibited’ before the showing of the film *Motherhood*.<sup>59</sup> A beauty contest organised by the Palace cinema, Blackwood in 1922 aroused considerable interest with over 140 contestants sending in their photographs. Twenty contestants were eventually short-listed, the *Merthyr Express* commenting that ‘no-one knew that so many charming creatures graced the district with their presence’.<sup>60</sup> The twenty contestants were filmed carrying out a range of activities such as playing tennis, dancing and ‘gracefully running’. They were tutored and stage-managed by the retired actor/theatre owner Mr Ebley who ‘showed a knowledge of human nature as well as resource in handling the pretty but excitable crowd’. All the contestants wore ‘their most delightful Sunday smiles’ and in one case ‘the smile was so broad the cameraman had to move his instrument back a yard and a half to take it all in’.<sup>61</sup> The newspaper speculated that ‘the appearance of so many pretty girls on film will it be whispered have a distinct effect on the matrimonial market of the district’.<sup>62</sup> The film was shown over several nights at the Palace cinema to ‘excited audience members who heartily cheered their favourite candidates as they appeared smiling on the film’.<sup>63</sup> The six winners were selected via a ballot of over 4,000 cinema-goers with

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<sup>57</sup> Audrey Field, *Picture Palace: A Social History of the Cinema* (London, 1974).

<sup>58</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 11<sup>th</sup> September 1915.

<sup>59</sup> *Monmouth Guardian*, 27<sup>th</sup> July 1917.

<sup>60</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 4<sup>th</sup> March 1922.

<sup>61</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 18<sup>th</sup> March 1922.

<sup>62</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 25<sup>th</sup> March 1922.

<sup>63</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 1<sup>st</sup> April 1922.

the overall winner being presented with £5 5s and an enlargement of their competition photograph.

As intended, the competition sparked considerable local interest. By popular demand the *Merthyr Express* reprinted the photographs of the contestants in the following week's paper and a lively debate broke out in the letters page over which valleys town had the prettiest girls. An 'ardent lover of beauty' claimed that 'without undue flippancy...Merthyr girls can knock Blackwood girls into a "cocked hat"'. 'The beauty of 'feminine Merthyrians was not confined to any specific class...it was found in the humblest collier's cottage on Tramroadside up to the houses of merchant princes in the Parade or West Grove'.<sup>64</sup> The following week, a 'lover of truth' wrote that 'whilst a few Blackwood girls are pretty, most are passable' and to find really beautiful girls it was necessary to cross the river to Oakdale where there was 'so much fresh air here on the hill that our ladies have lovely complexions which they have not borrowed from the chemist'. In contrast, Blackwood girls tried to make themselves attractive by 'wearing flesh coloured stockings and high heeled boots two sizes too small'.<sup>65</sup> In another letter to the newspaper, a 'Blackwood beauty' described the 'ardent lover of beauty' from Merthyr as a 'miserable old bachelor with no good looks of his own' and was likely to have been jilted by 'some pretty Blackwood girl and it has made him sour'.<sup>66</sup> To settle the matter, the *Merthyr Express* announced it was launching its own beauty contest with prizes of 'six guinea dresses for the six prettiest girls in the six valleys of Glamorganshire and East Monmouthshire'.<sup>67</sup>

Although competitions were a common industry ploy for attracting publicity and audiences, lotteries contravened the Lotteries Act and were strictly illegal. As the guide to running a picture theatre spelt out, 'if chance alone determines the winner those who hold out these bribes are sailing perilously near the wind' and the offender will be prosecuted and 'stamped as a rogue and a vagabond'.<sup>68</sup> In fact, many cinemas in the south Wales valleys did run lotteries during the 1920s and 1930s to encourage attendance and only occasionally were they prosecuted. For example, the New Hall

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<sup>64</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 1<sup>st</sup> April 1922.

<sup>65</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 15<sup>th</sup> April 1922.

<sup>66</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 15<sup>th</sup> April 1922.

<sup>67</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 29<sup>th</sup> April 1922.

<sup>68</sup> Kinematograph Weekly, *How to run a Picture Theatre*, p.102.

Theatre, Bargoed ran a Christmas draw in 1910 with prizes of a turkey, two geese, a pair of fowls, a duck and three joints of beef.<sup>69</sup> Other more blatant cases were prosecuted. For example, the Cosy Cinema, Pontlottyn was called before magistrates in 1915 along with the music hall artiste the Great Handko. The Great Handko, a self-proclaimed American millionaire and illusionist who ‘worked for a hobby and who had more money than he could spend’ had spent a week at the Cosy Cinema giving away forty to fifty postal orders each night along with ladies’ handbags and signet rings. The device was clearly aimed at attracting audiences as the cinema ‘took more money that week than ever before’. One woman, for example, went four times paid two shillings and received a signet ring worth 3d. Sargent Clinch who witnessed the performance gave evidence that the prizes had been given away haphazardly and in his view had been in contravention of the Lotteries Act. The court prosecuted the Great Handko as a ‘rogue and vagabond’ and fined him £20, in default of which he would spend 28 days in prison. The cinema owner was fined £5.<sup>70</sup>

More important than these side-show gimmicks was the procurement of films that matched the tastes of local audiences. The guide advised that the owner or manager should ‘know the locality and what will appeal most to its requirements’.<sup>71</sup> ‘Films that will please the audience of a theatre located in a neighbourhood made up of the laboring classes will not gain favour in a house situated in a high grade residential district’, although ‘it is surprising how well films that please in the exclusive neighbourhood are received by the low classes’. The editor of the *Caerphilly Journal* had a different view. He was critical of the way that ‘writers in the lay press are continually sneering at the way that pictures play to the gallery instead of appealing to art’. He challenged any one of ‘those clever folk to take a cinema in an industrial district and show high brow films and he would very quickly get what was coming to him... Every exhibitor who knew his job would tell him where he could put those pictures – tins and all’.<sup>72</sup>

Much has been written about the Americanisation of film culture and a common assumption is that film exhibitors, especially small-scale exhibitors, had

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<sup>69</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1910.

<sup>70</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 25<sup>th</sup> December 1915.

<sup>71</sup> *Kinematograph Weekly*, *How to run a Picture Theatre*, p.49

<sup>72</sup> *Caerphilly Journal*, 14<sup>th</sup> July 1934.

little choice but to take the films that they were offered. Although it is certainly the case that small-scale businesses lacked the purchasing power of large circuits, they still had considerable leverage in their selection of films. It must be remembered that hundreds of films were made each year - for example, even in 1918 when war-time conditions prevailed, over 700 new films were shown in Britain (although only 10% were British made).<sup>73</sup> For a period of at least five years, between 1917 and 1922, the Withers personally reviewed films before they were booked for their cinemas. Two journals of reviews have survived, one for the period June 1917 to December 1920 that includes reviews of over 2,700 films; the other journal for 1922 includes reviews of 670 films.<sup>74</sup> This represented a major undertaking, amounting to some 100 films a month from 1917 to 1920 and almost 60 films a month during 1922. Films were reviewed by various family members and judgments made on their suitability for local audiences. Films deemed to be unsuitable included:-

*Little Miss Hoover* – well done but a propaganda film, shouldn't book (April 1917).

*Conscience* – allegorical and psychic in character. Fine opening scenes from *Paradise Lost*. Might be over the heads of the Bargoed audience (July 1919).

*A Branded Soul* – 5 part photo-play with Gladys Brockwell. Rotten, the worst I have seen (January 1918).

*Hashumuro Togo* – a Japanese play which was well done and quite out of the common but not suitable for Bargoed (December 1917).

*La Tosca* – very finely produced. Strictly suited to high class houses (June 1918)

Films judged suitable included:-

*The Darling of Paris* – very fine play containing fine scenes especially those of Notre Dame. Much detail which is beautifully studied. Pictures life of a

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<sup>73</sup> Kinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1919.

<sup>74</sup> The journals are in the possession of the author and will be placed in an appropriate archive following completion of this study.

dancing girl who in infancy is stolen and exchanged by gypsies for a dwarf who is left in a child's room. Very suitable for Bargoed (July 1917).

*The Pullman Bride* and *A Bedroom Blunder* – Would do for Bargoed but were very vulgar (June 1918).

One film featured an actor who bore a striking resemblance to the manager of the New Hall Theatre, Bert Hinds, and was booked primarily for that reason:-

*Cactus Nell* – a Keystone comedy featuring life in a Western township with a woman sheriff whose sweetheart Bud was exactly like Bert. Bargoed must have it on that account. It was too funny. At times he was Bert's living image and also same size. (August 1917).

Robert James has argued that working men's institutes were similarly discriminating in their film selections, albeit that if their cinema operations were to survive they had to 'bow to the tastes of their customers: popular demand thus predictably ruled the day'. Although the films they chose lacked the 'outright political appeal' favoured by some committee members, the films they showed nevertheless supported 'the values that the Institute followed in their cultural and political outlook' as well as having broader audience appeal.<sup>75</sup>

The guide to running a picture theatre also recommends that cinema proprietors make their own films or 'topicals' of local events since 'everyone loves to see himself, or herself, or friends or children on the screen'. The guide goes on to say that 'a good topical is worth every penny it costs to make for it is an unfailing source of revenue in most provincial towns for at least ten days or a fortnight after the event has occurred'. Given the very basic advice provided by the guide one can only speculate on the quality of many of the films that were produced locally. For example, the guide advises film-makers not to turn the handle when the cap is still on the lens

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<sup>75</sup> Robert James "A Very Profitable Enterprise": South Wales Miners' Institute Cinemas in the 1930s', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 27, 2007, pp. 27-61.

and to remember to take the handle with them because otherwise they ‘will need a clever blacksmith or else go home and fetch it’.<sup>76</sup>

Music was an essential accompaniment to silent films, the picture theatre guide advised that ‘it should be borne in mind that picture theatre patrons do not like their pictures neat, but diluted with a little music’.<sup>77</sup> The type and quality of the music provided was an important way for cinema to distinguish their programmes. At the most basic level, someone would hammer out some tunes on an old piano but more up-market venues, such as the New Hall Theatre, Bargoed, had a resident orchestra. Advertisements boasted that special musical arrangements were made to suit the programme, thereby indicating that in less discriminating venues the same old tunes were played regardless of which films were being shown.

The role of the front of house proprietor or manager in keeping ahead of the competition was critically important, combining public relations skills, business acumen and a thorough grasp of stage-craft. The picture theatre guide describes the manager as ‘a man of methodical business habits, quick at feeling the pulse of the public, but above all, one who can make himself popular with the habitués of the place’.<sup>78</sup> The local press also recognized the importance of the role. When a popular local manager was due to leave the district, the *Merthyr Pioneer* commented that he would be difficult to replace since he had ‘the business acumen of a Wall Street “lion”; the tact of a principal judge at a ladies’ Pekinese dog show; something of the artist with an eye to scenic and musical effects; a capable manager of men; a popular man in the town and with his patrons...and a complete technical and practical grasp of the “legitimate” and vaudeville sides of the profession’.<sup>79</sup>

### **Escalating expenses and expectations**

Cinema proprietors needed to apply all of their ‘tricks of the trade’ since they faced very difficult market conditions. Not only were they in competition with other

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<sup>76</sup> Kinematograph Weekly, *How to run a Picture Theatre*, p.124.

<sup>77</sup> Kinematograph Weekly, *How to run a Picture Theatre*, p.81.

<sup>78</sup> Kinematograph Weekly, *How to run a Picture Theatre*, p.48.

<sup>79</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 9<sup>th</sup> December 1916.



cinemas and a multitude of other social activities, they also faced escalating business costs. Entertainment tax, introduced in 1916, very quickly became a major burden.<sup>80</sup> Intended initially as a war-time measure, the tax continued for several decades and had a particularly negative impact in areas such as the south Wales valleys that were hard hit by economic depression. One of the reasons for the disproportionate effects in poorer areas related to how the tax was structured. The flat rate represented a much higher proportion of the ticket price on cheaper seats. For example, when the tax was first introduced, the tax on a 2d seat was half a pence, whilst the tax on seats priced between 7s 6d to 12s 6d was 1s. The CEA argued that the tiered scale of the tax meant that the tax on 3d seats was equivalent to 33% whilst the tax on seats costing 2s 6d was significantly lower at around 7%. They also calculated that the greatest bulk of the tax was collected on lower priced seats, 92% on seats of 1s or less, 79% on seats of 6d and less and 41% on seats of 3d or less.<sup>81</sup> This meant that it was poorer customers that were bearing the burden of the tax. Another consequence of the tax's structure was that it was very difficult for cinema proprietors to raise their prices. The CEA argued that 'the tax is so devised that it is impossible to increase the price of any category of seats by 1d or even half a pence without bringing the seat into the next higher category and thereby subjecting it to a higher rate of tax'.<sup>82</sup> For example, tax on a 2d seat was half a pence and if a cinema owner wanted to increase the price to 2 and a half pence or 3d, the next highest tax bracket of 1d applied and so a 2d seat would become a 4d seat, thereby doubling the price. The CEA strenuously lobbied the Government from the time the tax was introduced and throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In May 1917, for example, a deputation supported by nine trade bodies including the CEA lobbied the Treasury, 'the first time in the history of the entertainment industry that every association - managers, artistes, musicians, stage workers – in fact, every branch of the industry, from the MD to the smallest programme boy – is here! Not for selfish motives but to save the industry'. Treasury officials recognized the determination of the lobby whilst decrying some of their business methods. In a briefing to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, officials described cinema proprietors as 'particularly difficult to deal with; their intentions are genuinely

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<sup>80</sup> Introduced by the Finance (New Duties) Act s1-2 and Finance Act s12.

<sup>81</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association deputation 12<sup>th</sup> April 1917, The National Archives, reference T172/495.

<sup>82</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association deputation 24<sup>th</sup> May 1918, The National Archives, reference T172/839 and T172/845.

admirable, their business methods are usually deplorable and they are quick to appeal to Members of Parliament and others in support of their grievances'.<sup>83</sup> However, the lobbying had minimal impact. The concessions granted by the Government were limited; for example, in 1916, the tax on children's 1d matinee shows was removed, in 1918 the half pence tax was extended to cover 2.5d seats (from 2d) and the 3d tax was extended to cover 7d seats (from 6d) and in 1920 the tax on seats of 2d or less was removed.

The trade body calculated that Entertainment Tax accounted for 26% of total receipts, whether or not a profit was made and that with the inclusion of income tax, corporation tax and film duty, the Government was taking 40% of gross takings before cinema proprietors received a penny. 'Big circuits may be able to continue for some little time under these circumstances; but many of the proprietors of single theatres would go under, especially in working class areas since the tax burden fell most heavily on lower priced seats and 'the market in poorer communities would not bear the raising of prices'. The CEA argued that the tax was having a 'restrictive effect on the conduct of business to which no other industry had been subjected and which is greatly unfair'. 1935 brought some relief when tax on seats 6d and below was removed, the CEA commenting that 'this injection of oxygen greatly invigorated the body of the trade just when it was wanted',<sup>84</sup> but for almost the whole of the 1920s and 1930s the tax remained a major burden on the industry.

Although cinema proprietors shielded their customers from the impact of the tax wherever possible, there was public recognition of the impact as this poem published in the *Bargoed Journal* illustrates:-

*It has come at last, we told you it would,  
It's the end of all things, everyone knows.  
We must join the army, forget all our woes,  
McKenna has taxed the cinema shows.*

*We smiled at tobacco and beer taxes,  
At Zeppelin starts and hurricane snows,  
But now with grief and unhappy head bows,*

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<sup>83</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association deputation, May 1917, The National Archives, reference T172/495.

<sup>84</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1936.

*McKenna has taxed the cinema shows.*

*The manner coal, bread and bottles,  
Are rising each week  
To altitudes which no one yet knows,  
Leaves us cold, what extracts sweat from our pores,  
McKenna has taxed the cinema shows.*

*We have never wrangled about doing our bit,  
No conscientious objection to fighting our foes,  
But the very last straw as everyone knows,  
McKenna has taxed the cinema shows.<sup>85</sup>*

Prosecutions of cinema proprietors and managers for entertainment tax evasion were fairly commonplace in the south Wales valleys. Jackson-Withers was prosecuted along with his cinema manager just a few months after the tax was introduced in 1916. In court a customs officer gave evidence that when he had visited the Empire cinema in Abercynon he had paid 6d for admission and had been supplied with ‘an ordinary roll ticket and a penny tax stamp quite separate from the former. The latter appeared to have been used before for there was a portion of a roll ticket adhering to it and showing the printer’s name. The stamps should have been obliterated or torn up, but instead were placed in a tin box’. Jackson-Withers’ solicitor, John Evans of Bargoed, attempted to extricate Jackson-Withers from blame by arguing that he had ‘placed implicit confidence in his manager and the Act did not intend to place the responsibility on proprietor and manager’. However, the Bench found both Jackson-Withers and the manager guilty, fining the former £10 and the latter £5.<sup>86</sup>

Jackson-Withers was certainly not alone in attempting to side-step the tax. There were multiple prosecutions for tax evasion in the south Wales valleys throughout the 1920s and 1930s. For example, the 1921 CEA Yearbook included details of twenty-four prosecutions for tax evasion that had occurred in the UK during the previous twelve months, three of which related to cinemas in the valleys, the Palace cinema in Caerphilly, the Temperance Hall in Merthyr Tydfil and the Hirwain Victoria Hall, Abercynon.

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<sup>85</sup> Abbreviated version of poem published in the *Bargoed Journal*, 27<sup>th</sup> April 1916.

<sup>86</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1916.

In addition to the difficulties generated by the Entertainment tax, cinema proprietors faced escalating costs more generally. Prices for essential services and materials had increased sharply during World War One. For example, the CEA deputation to the Treasury in May 1918 reported that overall running costs had increased by between 40% and 65% over the past few years, with some expenses, such as insurance and repairs, more than doubling.<sup>87</sup> Although, these figures need to be treated with caution since it was clearly the CEA's intention to strengthen the case for tax reforms by painting as bleak a picture as possible, there was undoubtedly considerable price inflation during World War One and prices did not subsequently revert to their pre-war time levels.

Local authority rates were also high in the south Wales valleys reflecting the increase in welfare spending necessitated by the depression and high interest charges payable on loans for housing and other infrastructure schemes. During 1934-1935 Gelligaer UDC had the second highest rates in the south Wales valleys, 24s 3d in the pound, compared with 11s in the pound in 1913-1914. Merthyr Tydfil had the highest rates at 27s 6d in the pound.<sup>88</sup> *The Caerphilly Journal* decried the situation whereby 'the impoverished trade of Merthyr and the Rhondda should pay respectively 27s 6d and 22s 6d in the pound rates whilst the flourishing business folk of happier areas should get away with 7s 6d in the pound'. Action was essential 'unless the nation wants these derelict areas not only to die but to go to the devil.'<sup>89</sup> A conference of twenty-one Glamorganshire Municipal and Poor Law authorities held in 1926 unanimously identified 'the tremendous increase in the burden of rates due to the abnormal cost of Poor Law relief following serious unemployment' as the biggest challenge they faced. The conference sent a telegram to the Goschen Committee, which had been set up by Government in connection with the industrial depression, urging the Government to 'grant substantial financial assistance to necessitous areas as the increasing rate burden is preventing municipal authorities embarking upon essential schemes in connection with housing and health matters, apart from long overdue town improvements'.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association deputation May 1918, The National Archives, reference T172/839 and T172/845.

<sup>88</sup> Mr Grenfell, *Parliamentary debates*, Commons. Vol ¾. Col. 2091. 15<sup>th</sup> July 1936.

<sup>89</sup> *Caerphilly Journal*, 21<sup>st</sup> April 1934.

<sup>90</sup> *Caerphilly Journal*, 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1926.

During the early 1920s, many cinemas in the district were liable to pay rates of between £200-£400 a year, the equivalent of around £11,000 to £18,000 at today's values, a considerable amount especially in a time of severe economic depression. Consequently, many businesses struggled to make payments, and appeals to the Rating Assessment Committee were commonplace. For example, in 1924, Jackson-Withers was successful in getting the rates on the New Hall reduced from £264 to £240 and the rates on the theatre reduced from £330 to £300,<sup>91</sup> although the rates for the Palace cinema remained the same.<sup>92</sup> Before the same meeting of the Merthyr Union Assessment Committee<sup>93</sup> was the Merthyr Electric Theatre seeking a reduction in their rates that had been set at £344. The solicitor for the cinema explained that the rates had been increased from last year because of the addition of a room for people to wait in when there was a full house. The local authority had required the provision of the room on the advice of the police but 'instead of the extra room being a benefit, it had been a serious loss because people who used to wait outside in queues were now unseen and queues were the finest advertisements anyone could have'. In spite of the solicitor's assertion that 'things in the entertainment world had got into a bad state' the assessment committee refused to reduce the rates. The cinema company had supplied information only on net profits for last year (£300) not the balance sheet and the committee felt that they only had a partial picture of the company's financial status. The Theatre Royal, Merthyr was more successful. Having borne a loss of £1,102 the previous year (the equivalent of some £60,000 at today's values) the company's rates for the coming year were halved.<sup>94</sup>

The proliferation of rules and regulations relating to film exhibition over the years also had significant cost implications for cinema proprietors. Home Office rules

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<sup>91</sup> It seems that the New Hall theatre was rated separately to the other parts of the building that included the New Hall café and ballroom.

<sup>92</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 1<sup>st</sup> March 1924.

<sup>93</sup> The committee covered Aberdare, Gelligaer, Merthyr, Rhigos and Vaynor districts.

<sup>94</sup> *Merthyr Express*, March 1<sup>st</sup> 1924.

and regulations based on the 1909 Cinematograph Act were issued every year or so,<sup>95</sup> and county and district councils also attached their own conditions to licenses.<sup>96</sup> The regulations and license conditions, driven by concerns relating to public health, safety and morals, primarily focused on opening hours, access of children and building conditions and facilities. Another major concern was fire safety since fires at cinemas and other film exhibition venues were not unusual occurrences, especially in the early 1900s. For example, a serious fire at Abercynon Workmen's Hall in 1917 led to one death and extensive damage to the building. Shortly after an evening film exhibition, there were several explosions in the engine house and the fire spread rapidly to the main hall. Two film operators escaped although one was badly burned. However, 'a lad who took much interest in the workings of the machine', the son of the local undertaker, was reported missing and was later discovered overcome by smoke and subsequently 'succumbed'.<sup>97</sup>

Until the late 1920s fire safety inspections by Gelligaer UDC were largely ad hoc and were usually carried out in response to a complaint from the police or a member of the public. For example, in February 1916, Inspector Canton visited the New Hall Theatre, Bargoed following a complaint from a member of the public. As a consequence of this visit he informed Gelligaer UDC that he refused to support Jackson-Withers' license application since not only was the venue open on Sundays (more of which later in this chapter), but the premises was also a 'potential fire-trap'. 'In the case of an outbreak of fire, the audience would have to go down the exit stairs, into a bar and store room and through a narrow passage the wall of which has fallen down'. He considered 'the whole place to be dangerous... if there was to be a rush it would become so congested that females would get crushed to death'. The New Hall Theatre was issued with a license for three months which was renewed when all necessary building works were undertaken.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> For example, Home Office model conditions were issued January 1920 (Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/14), May 1924 (Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/20), July 1930 (Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/26), July 1933 (Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/29)

<sup>96</sup> For example, Glamorgan County Council issued model conditions in May 1917 (Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/12), October 1918 (Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/13) and September 1927 (Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/23).

<sup>97</sup> *Monmouth Guardian*, 28<sup>th</sup> July 1917.

<sup>98</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/11.

By the late 1920s regular inspections had become a fixed feature of the regulatory regime within Gelligaer district. Initially it was the Chief Surveyor and also sometimes the Medical Officer or Sanitary Officer who carried out these inspections. For example, in March 1927 the Surveyor and Chief Medical Officer jointly reported to Gelligaer UDC on the condition of the Palace and Hanbury cinemas in Bargoed and the Cinema, Ystrad Mynach. The latter was only granted a license subject to a number of building alterations being undertaken.<sup>99</sup>

The inspection regime was further tightened in the 1930s. New regulations relating mainly to supervision/staffing levels and fire exits, came into force in July 1930 following the Paisley cinema fire disaster in which sixty nine children died and over a hundred children were admitted to hospital. During a special Hogmanay matinee exhibition a film had started to smolder in the rewind room, giving off smoke and fumes and causing a panicked stampede to a fire exit door that was locked.<sup>100</sup> Gelligaer UDC established a Fire Brigade Committee in 1930 and in 1931 the county Chief Fire Officer was charged with carrying out quarterly inspections of all cinemas and theatres.<sup>101</sup> The problem of overcrowding, in particular members of the audience sitting and standing in the aisles, was brought before the council time and time again throughout the 1930s, and in some cases led to prosecution.<sup>102</sup> For example, in 1932 the Palace cinema, New Tredegar was summoned for permitting obstruction by allowing people to stand in the gangways and was fined £2 and £3 3s costs.<sup>103</sup> Alfred Withers, who by this time was managing the Bargoed cinemas, was regularly warned about overcrowding but seems to have in most cases avoided prosecution by giving short-lived assurances that he would tackle the problem.

Although the council seems to have had little success in reducing overcrowding it did succeed in implementing a number of other fire safety adaptations relating, for example, to film storage, fire extinguishing equipment, fire exits, lighting, fire curtains and the arrangement of seating. Some of the fire safety

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<sup>99</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/22.

<sup>100</sup> Audrey Field, *Picture Palace: A Social History of the Cinema* (London, 1974), p. 102.

<sup>101</sup> For example, Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, references UDG/C/1/14, UDG/C/1/25, UDG/C/1/26, UDG/C/1/27, UDG/C/1/28, UDG/C/1/29, UDC/C/1/30.

<sup>102</sup> For example, Glamorgan Archives, September 1931 (UDG/C/1/27), June 1932 (UDG/C/1/28), March 1934 (UDG/C/1/29), February 1935 (UDG/C/1/30).

<sup>103</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Year Book, 1933.

requirements proposed by local councils were very onerous indeed. For example, in July 1932 Rhondda UDC let it be known that it would be requiring cinemas within the district to ‘keep a fireman in uniform upon the premises an hour before the beginning, during the performance and an hour after it finishes’. Consequently, a delegation from the South Wales branch of the CEA, including ‘a prince of speakers’ Mr Victor Davies (who was by this time involved in business with the Withers), attended a council meeting to argue that ‘the Rhondda exhibitors could not bear an extra shilling expense at the present time, especially in view of the increase in tax’. Their more practicable alternative to train staff members in fire safety was accepted by the council.<sup>104</sup>

The public health remit of local councils generated an additional raft of regulatory requirements. For example, the Withers received a number of statutory notices requiring repairs to their Bargoed cinemas.<sup>105</sup> Local authorities were also entitled to close cinemas and dictate opening hours during epidemics. For example, in January 1919 during an influenza epidemic Aberdare Council issued an order that cinemas should close for thirty minutes each evening ‘to give management the opportunity of ventilating the premises’. However, the local newspaper argued that ‘the remedy is worse than the disease’ since ‘outside the Aberdare cinema there were hundreds of people waiting in the rain. By the time half an hour had expired many were wet to the skin and the crowd had grown to such dimensions that the police had to be requisitioned to control the queue’.<sup>106</sup>

Although regulatory requirements undoubtedly involved cinema proprietors in additional expenditure, it could be argued that the onward march of cinematic technology and the demand of audiences for ever-greater levels of comfort had even greater cost implications. The advent of ‘talkies’ in the late 1920s and early 1930s had major capital implications, the CEA commenting that there was ‘considerable upset in the cinema industry owing to the advent of the talkie pictures which has necessitated

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<sup>104</sup> *Caerphilly Journal*, 6<sup>th</sup> August 1932.

<sup>105</sup> For example, repairs to defective roofs and troughing and external walls at the New Hall, 1929 (Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/24) and a requirement to cleanse the site of the old dance hall near the Hanbury Hotel, 1920 (Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/15).

<sup>106</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 11<sup>th</sup> January 1919.



much capital outlay for the installation necessary'.<sup>107</sup> Figures of between £2,000 and £5,000 were quoted by the trade body (the equivalent of £113,000 to £280,000 at today's values) which were clearly out of the reach of many small cinemas that were barely making ends meet. The CEA also argued that the increase in trade as a result of talkies was illusionary. 'Many people who crowded into the newly equipped houses did so at the expense of those which remained silent'.<sup>108</sup> Once again, 'the small man has suffered most during the transition period. He has, as a rule, less room for expansion and therefore finds it far more difficult to make increased returns to balance increased expenditure.' However, the CEA held out some hope for the 'small man' as having fitted out the large cinemas, sound installation companies had turned from 'the Rolls Royce to the Austin Seven market' and were developing models for smaller cinemas. Indeed, Jackson-Withers set up a sound equipment company, Sounds Ltd in 1930.<sup>109</sup> However, the need to upgrade was unremitting, the CEA commenting, 'we thought we had improved our sound reproduction equipment almost to perfection, but before we could consider our arrangements stabilised we were invited to yet another stage.'<sup>110</sup> The advent of colour films in the late 1930s required a further wave of investment without 'expectation of commensurate return... Colour will become an essential component to the bigger pictures, but while it must add materially to the cost there is no guarantee of a correspondingly increased revenue.'<sup>111</sup>

Film hire costs also escalated as film renters, occupying a position between producer and exhibitor, were 'increasingly the ones who were in a position to determine prices'.<sup>112</sup> Once again, it was small cinema companies that bore the heaviest burden since a greater proportion of their revenue went on film hire and so they were more vulnerable to cost increases.<sup>113</sup> Also, as the CEA pointed out, 'at least circuits are in a good position regarding booking terms compared with small independents'.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association deputation to the Treasury.

<sup>108</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year book 1931.

<sup>109</sup> The company is listed in the New Companies section of the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book 1931, although no further information on the company is available.

<sup>110</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1935.

<sup>111</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1939.

<sup>112</sup> Michael Chanan, *The Dream that Kicks: The pre-history and early years of cinema in Britain*, (London, Boston and Henley, 1980), p.237.

<sup>113</sup> Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*, p.62.

<sup>114</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1939.

Small companies were also in a prejudicial position in relation to meeting British film quotas first introduced by the 1927 Cinematograph Films Act. The Act was intended to boost British film production which was struggling to compete in a market dominated by north American films. By 1914 the North American share of the market had reached 60%.<sup>115</sup> The size of the American home market for films (some four times as big as the British market) enabled American companies to undercut local producers abroad whilst British production had fallen significantly during World War One.<sup>116</sup> The quota was initially set at 7.5%, which did not cause too much difficulty. Many areas, including south Wales valleys towns, held British Film weeks as an aid to meeting their quotas (Figure 16 shows an advertisement placed by the Palace, Merthyr Tydfil for such a week in March 1924). However, in 1935 the quota was increased to 15% and in 1936 to 20% which in the view of the CEA made it ‘impossible for the smaller independent exhibitor to comply’.<sup>117</sup> Small exhibitors were in an invidious position. If they fulfilled their quota there was a risk that they would alienate audiences since many ‘quota quickies’ were of dubious quality and most audiences showed clear preferences for Hollywood films. If they failed to fulfill their quota they would be prosecuted and after three prosecutions they would lose their license. They could apply to the Board of Trade for exemption if they could show that ‘the quota was not commercially practicable by reason of the character of the British films available or the excessive cost of such films’. However, official exception was not easy to obtain. The CEA commented that ‘if an exhibitor has several cinemas they are in a better position to obtain sufficient good British films whereas the exhibitor with, say, only one or two halls will have to take what he can get (and today, unfortunately, many British films are not at all good) and run the risk of offending his patrons simply in order to comply with the quota because today the public know what films they want and if they cannot get them will go elsewhere or not at all’.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Chanan, *The Dream that Kicks*, p.244.

<sup>116</sup> Chanan, *The Dream that Kicks*, p.262.

<sup>117</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors’ Association Year Book, 1937.

<sup>118</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors’ Association Year Book, 1939.

Figure 16 Great British Film Week  
(Source: *Merthyr Express*, 8<sup>th</sup> March 1924)



### ‘A little gold mine’ or yawning money pit— cinemas in crisis

One of the biggest problems for cinemas was that they could not easily raise their prices to cover escalating costs. As we have seen earlier in this chapter, the leisure market was crowded and the economic depression had had a deflationary impact on admission prices. To a certain extent, working men’s institutes and public halls drove this downward pressure by significantly reducing their charges during economically difficult periods. Whilst Bargoed Working Men’s Institute did not hold film exhibitions (presumably because the needs of the town were already adequately covered by the three Withers’ controlled cinemas) they hosted many other events and were generally ready to adjust their prices to reflect local economic circumstances. For example, in May 1926 at the beginning of the coal stoppage the Institute halved dance admission charges to 6d for ladies and 9d for gents (they already allowed unemployed people half price entrance on production of unemployment cards) and one month later in June reduced charges to 2d for both ladies and gents until December when charges were increased but not to their pre-strike levels.<sup>119</sup> Churches and chapels were also active participants in the hosting of socials, with some even holding regular film exhibitions. For example, an ‘enterprising vicar’ invited a

<sup>119</sup> Bargoed and District Workmen’s Library and Institute minutes, South Wales Coalfield Collection, Swansea University, SWCC:MNA/1/4.

company supplying non-inflammable ‘safety’ film (the showing of which did not require a cinematograph license) to hold regular Friday evening films in his church at Pencoed. According to the *Caerphilly Journal*, ‘the scenes witnessed that night will not easily be forgotten, for as the exhibitors’ car arrived in the vicinity they found the street thronged with hundreds of children – children of all denominations – clamouring for admission to the church, and cheer after cheer rang out in the autumnal air’.<sup>120</sup> Cinema proprietors were in a difficult position. There was a downward pressure on prices locally and the Entertainment Tax scales made it difficult for them to introduce even the most marginal price increases that the crowded leisure market might be able to tolerate. As a consequence, cinema ticket prices in Wales were below the national average and the exhibitors’ share of net takings was lower (per seat) in Wales than in any other part of Britain.<sup>121</sup>

Although cinemas did not lack customers, low admission charges coupled with high and escalating running costs meant that the operating margins of many cinemas in the south Wales valleys were very slight indeed. As Miskell expresses it ‘the independent cinema manager, while presiding over the home of the most popular form of mass entertainment faced a number of constraints and could expect only modest profit margins even when attendances were booming’.<sup>122</sup> The on-going popularity of cinema during the inter-war years is indicated by the frequency with which local authorities took cinemas to task over over-crowded aisles and press commentary also suggests that ‘play-houses, cinemas and dance halls are, for the most part, crowded six days a week’.<sup>123</sup> Indeed, some questioned how people could afford to spend on leisure given that there are ‘many thousands of unemployed people who draw the dole or parish relief’. In a letter to the *Merthyr Express*, one reader says that ‘in strolling down the streets of Merthyr last week I found dance announcements in the shop windows galore, with prices of 1s to 3s 6d – and this is poor Merthyr on its “last legs”’.<sup>124</sup> In September 1926 the Gelligaer Relief Committee considered but rejected a resolution to deduct 1s per week from relief payments if recipients were in the ‘habit of going on char-a-banc trips’. The committee member who put forward the

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<sup>120</sup> *Caerphilly Journal*, 10<sup>th</sup> November 1934.

<sup>121</sup> Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*, p.60.

<sup>122</sup> Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*, p.63.

<sup>123</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 21<sup>st</sup> April 1928.

<sup>124</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 21<sup>st</sup> April 1928.

resolution argued that they had to ‘borrow every penny we pay in relief and also pay 5%’ and so it was essential that they focused on the truly needy. The majority of the committee, however, felt that the resolution opened up a ‘very big question’ and queried where it would end. ‘We shall be asked why we give relief to people who go to the pictures or football matches’.<sup>125</sup> The reality was that cinema provided a cheap, comfortable and informal escape from the severe hardships of the inter-war years. As Audrey Field has expressed it ‘the worst times became, the more people loved the cinema’.<sup>126</sup> People were ‘not just getting a film but warmth, colour, comfort, opulent looking surroundings and a royal welcome from the manager’.<sup>127</sup> Gordon Comstock, the central character of Orwell’s *Keep the Aspidistras Flying*, acknowledges the seductive appeal of cinema in spite of the threat it posed to literature:

*But still there is a soggy attraction about it. To sit on the padded seat in the warm smoke-scented darkness, letting the flickering drivel on the screen gradually over-whelm you- feeling the waves of its silliness lap you round until you seem to drown, intoxicated, in a viscous sea – after all, it’s the kind of drug we need. The right drug for friendless people.*<sup>128</sup>

Additionally, in spite of the quota quickies, the 1930s was ‘a period of unparalleled richness and variety’ in terms of available films.<sup>129</sup> The juxtaposition that existed between economic strife and a keenness to make the most of life is illustrated by the juxtaposition of advertisements in the *Caerphilly Journal* in July 1934 (Figure 17). One is for the sale of unredeemed goods held by the local pawnbroker, the other for amusements at Barry Island.

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<sup>125</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 4<sup>th</sup> September 1926.

<sup>126</sup> Audrey Field, *Picture Palace: A Social History of the Cinema* (London, 1974), p. 125.

<sup>127</sup> Field, *Picture Palace*, p. 95.

<sup>128</sup> George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (London, 1936).

<sup>129</sup> Field, *Picture Palace*, p. 105.

Figure 17 Pawnbroker's bargains and holidays at Barry Island  
(Source: *Caerphilly Journal*, July 7th 1934)

<p><b>PAWNBROKER'S Bargains.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A Singer's Treadle Sewing Machine, in perfect condition, complete with cover, etc, only £5/15/0.</li> <li>2. A Singer's hand sewing machine, in perfect working order, boat shaped bobbin, only £2/10/0.</li> <li>3. A Singer's hand sewing machine, condition practically as new, boat shaped bobbin, cost over £3, a bargain to anyone at £3/17/6.</li> <li>4. Unredeemed portable Decca gramophone, condition as new, only £2/6.</li> <li>5. Unredeemed portable gramophone, very good tone and condition, a bargain at 18/6.</li> <li>6. Unredeemed portable Lissenola gramophone, in perfect condition, a genuine bargain, 15/6.</li> <li>7. Here's a bargain, if ever there was one, an Underwood portable typewriter, suitable for English or Spanish correspondence, in very good condition, cost over £14. My price £4/10/0.</li> <li>8. A powerful pair of prismatic binoculars, magnification 8x, complete in solid leather case, only £2/10/0.</li> <li>9. Here's a glass suitable for any occasion, The Derby, Ascot or The Grand National, very powerful prism binoculars, magnification 8x25, as good as a Goertz or Zeiss, only £5/5/0. Complete in leather case.</li> <li>10. Something for the budding star gazers, an Astronomer's Telescope, complete with tripod, day and night glasses, and strong wooden box, only £2/15/0.</li> <li>11. A very strong telescopic camera lens, only 4/6.</li> </ol>	<p><b>HOLIDAYS. HOLIDAYS.</b></p> <p><b>LOOK !!!</b></p> <p><b>A JOLLY HOLIDAY AT BARRY ISLAND.</b></p> <p><b>PAT COLLINS</b></p> <p><b>KING OF SHOWMEN,</b> presents The Latest and most Sensational Novelties on the Pleasure Park, including The</p> <p><b>New AMERICAN "DODGEM CARS"</b> drive yourself in the fastest and most thrilling Sports Cars on the Island.</p> <p><b>THE "GLOBE INFERNAL"</b> a Wonder Attraction from Coney Island, U.S.A. and presenting "SPEEDY" BOB LEE, <b>LOOPING THE LOOP WITH A HIGH POWERED MOTOR CYCLE.</b> <b>DEFYING DEATH IN A STEEL GLOBE !!</b> <b>MORE THRILLING THAN THE WALL OF DEATH !!</b></p> <p><b>THE JUNGLE GRAND NATIONAL</b> — ALL THE RAGE —</p> <p><b>THE WHIP, CATERPILLAR</b> More Thrillers and of course the Old Favourites</p> <p><b>THE WATER CHUTE</b> and also the <b>FIGURE 8</b> together with a host of other attractions for young and old</p> <p><b>:: A WHIRL OF PLEASURE ::</b></p> <p><b>PAT COLLINS</b></p> <p><b>FOR THE BEST AND LATEST IN AMUSEMENTS.</b></p> <hr/> <p><b>ROWE'S CAFE</b> <b>BARRY ISLAND.</b> <b>THE CAFE THAT CATERS FOR PARTIES.</b></p> <p><b>OUR ICES</b> served in the Cafe or the Parlour adjoining, secured a Class "A" Diploma at the Olympia</p>
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The CEA recognized that small cinemas in depressed industrial areas were suffering most of all commenting that ‘in industrial areas unemployment is so widespread that smaller halls have been trading on far too narrow a margin for safety’.<sup>130</sup> The trade body pointed out that although ‘the independent exhibitor is the backbone of the trade in these days he has a host of enemies’, and ‘only those in close contact with the small independent showman can realise his plight’.<sup>131</sup> In recognition of the importance of small halls to the industry (small independent cinemas made up around a third of the industry) in 1931 the CEA set up a joint committee of renters and exhibitors ‘to find ways of easing the position of smaller halls that have found it difficult to carry on in the face of adverse circumstances’.<sup>132</sup> However, the CEA believed that the small independent exhibitor had an important strength. ‘His personal contact with his patrons is a very powerful asset and he can always give points to the over-regimental circuit house, whose manager is seldom allowed to exercise the

<sup>130</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1933.

<sup>131</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1935.

<sup>132</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1932.

freedom of action and initiative that are the most important qualifications of the true showman’.<sup>133</sup>

In spite of the natural advantages of the small-scale showman, the inter-war years saw many cinemas in the south Wales valleys make substantial losses and go out of business. Miskell writes that ‘one of the most striking features of valleys cinemas is ... that so many actually survived through out the 1920s and 1930s’.<sup>134</sup> However, the survival of most cinema venues gives a misleading impression of continuity. The reality was one of serial business failures. The Theatre Royal, Merthyr, for example, converted to full-time film exhibition in the early 1920s but still incurred substantial losses, £1,102 in 1923 (the equivalent of £60,000 at today’s values). When it was the ‘only place of entertainment in town’ Will Smithson the owner had been offered £20,000 for the freehold (equivalent to c£1m today). His solicitor told the Merthyr Union Assessment Committee that the ‘entertainment tax had killed the whole thing’.<sup>135</sup>

Many working men’s institutes also struggled due to increased competition and a reduction in subscriptions due to colliery stoppages. Llanbradach Institute, for example, ran into financial difficulty in the 1920s and in October 1926 was sued by the Gaumont Company in the Westminster County Court for failure to pay for films they had ordered, the ninth occasion on which the film company had sued the Institute. The films had been booked in July 1924 by a former secretary who had been ‘reckless in his bookings and exceeded his authority’. The cinema had since closed and the bill had remained unpaid. The Institute contested the claim on several grounds the chief being that they were being sued as a firm whereas they were a non-registered and non-incorporated members’ club. The film company won the case, the judge commenting that it had been ‘extremely shabby of the Institute Committee to have raised the defence of their non-liability’.<sup>136</sup> At the Institute’s annual meeting the following year the Chairman reported significant losses; a £538 deficit in the Hall account, a £146 deficit in the Institute account, a debit to law and film costs of £140, liabilities to creditors for films booked but not shown of £1,497 and a Nurses Fund

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<sup>133</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors’ Association Year Book, 1935.

<sup>134</sup> Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*, p.48.

<sup>135</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 1<sup>st</sup> March 1924.

<sup>136</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 20<sup>th</sup> October 1926.

deficit of £53. The financial difficulties were attributed to subscriptions falling from £700 a year to £222, and the difficulties of raising prices in line with costs.<sup>137</sup>

It was not just cinemas that were experiencing difficult trading conditions. Retail businesses were also hard hit.<sup>138</sup> In February 1924 a solicitor told the Merthyr Union Assessment Committee that he knew ‘many people who would be glad to give up their leases at Merthyr today and who would give a handsome sum to surrender them because things were so bad’. An editorial in the *Merthyr Express* supports this view. ‘There is no shadow of a doubt that business just now is in a perilous state and that trades people have to exercise all their ingenuity and resourcefulness in cutting the coat according to the cloth’.<sup>139</sup> In his autobiography, the oral historian George Ewart Evans, describes how his family’s grocery shop went out of business during the 1920s and the impact it had on family life. He writes that ‘a blight had fallen on the whole area and he [Evans’ father] continued to run the shop on his modest capital, hoping against all odds that it would clear. Instead, it got worse’. When wholesalers refused to give his father further credit, he bought goods from fellow traders in an attempt to keep the sparsely stocked shop going. However, it was to no avail and Evans’ father was eventually declared bankrupt.<sup>140</sup>

Some traders took more drastic action. Louis Goldblat was sentenced to three years penal servitude for setting fire to his drapers shop at Blackwood on Christmas Eve 1923 with intent to defraud. Goldblat, an undischarged bankrupt, and his son were in serious financial difficulty and the prospect of receiving £300 insurance for the shop and £2000 for the stock proved irresistible. The shop, which was located next to the Palace cinema, went up in twenty foot flames with a ‘wonderful suddenness’ that the court decided could not have been caused by ‘dropping a cigarette or anything of that kind.’ An empty petrol can found on the premises and the fact that the shop was largely empty of stock weighed against the defendant.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 10<sup>th</sup> September 1927.

<sup>138</sup> Dennis Thomas, Economic Decline in Trevor Herbert and Gareth Elwyn Jones (eds.) *Wales Between The Wars* (Cardiff, 1988), p. 23.

<sup>139</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1914.

<sup>140</sup> George Ewart Evans, *The Strength of the Hills: An Autobiography* (London, 1983).

<sup>141</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 9<sup>th</sup> February 1924.



The problems persisted into the 1930s. The editor of the *Caerphilly Journal* reported that one Porth trader had told him that he was at ‘the lowest of all his low water marks... I said two years ago that it can’t get any worse, because if it does I can’t carry on, but it got worse, much worse, and then I said again, oh well, it can’t get any worse than this. But it has, it has got worse every year, almost every month. I wouldn’t stay in the business another day if I could get a job at a living wage’.<sup>142</sup> But ‘a rather big retail man’ told the newspaper that Porth traders ‘oughtn’t to grumble’ as in a town further up the valley, ‘he didn’t believe one third of the businessmen were solvent’.<sup>143</sup> The newspaper attributes some of the difficulties to ‘the exodus of people from these valleys once they get the bus habit... Every bus to Cardiff on a Saturday is packed and they run every hour. There is a bus to Pontypridd every ten minutes and every one is packed... The people won’t go to their village cinema any more: for a couple of coppers more they can go to the big cinema in the town a few miles away’.<sup>144</sup>

The financial fragility of many cinema businesses led to a considerable churn in cinema ownership and management. Table 5, based on the analysis of company records described in Chapter Four, shows that two-fifths (42%) of cinema companies had been in business for five years or more. By way of comparison, in 2012, 81% of small and medium sized businesses in the UK had been in existence for more than five years.<sup>145</sup>

No. of years	No. of companies	% of companies
1-2	3	10%
3-5	10	32%
6-10	8	26%
11-20	6	19%
21-30	1	3%
30+	1	3%
Not known	2	6%
	31	100%*

\* Rounded to 100%

<sup>142</sup> *Caerphilly Journal*, 4<sup>th</sup> June 1932.

<sup>143</sup> *Caerphilly Journal*, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1934.

<sup>144</sup> *Caerphilly Journal*, 30<sup>th</sup> April 1932.

<sup>145</sup> Based on a survey of 4,768 small and medium businesses that employed at least one person and no more than 250 people. *Small Business Survey 2012: SME Employees, A Report by BMG Research*, Department for Business Innovation and Skills, April 2013.

However, these company longevity figures present an overly positive picture since many, indeed most, cinema companies leased out their premises and leases changed hands with alarming frequency. For example, in the eight year life of the New Tredegar Electric Theatre Company, the cinema was leased out at least three times. The company, which was set up in 1912 by two publicans, a contractor and a shop keeper from Pengam and New Tredegar, struggled to make a decent profit. The cinema cost £3000 to develop and was funded by a combination of a share issue (almost 2,000 shares were sold at £1 each), a £1,000 overdraft and a debenture issue of £300. In the first year of operation to July 1913 company records show a £65 loss and in 1914 the company leased the cinema to Jackson-Withers. The New Tredegar Electric Theatre Company survived falteringly to 1920 when the business was sold for just £1528, approximately a half of what it cost to set up.<sup>146</sup> Company records suggest that no dividends were ever paid out to shareholders. Jackson-Withers retained the lease for approximately four years to around 1918 when it was transferred to Bert Hinds, his former manager at the New Hall theatre.

Hinds' tenure at New Tredegar ended in 1924 when he was made bankrupt with debts of £3,409 (£185,000 at today's values). In order to enhance his income he had also taken on the tenancy of the Ruperra Arms Hotel in New Tredegar. He told the bankruptcy court that his situation was due to 'the slump in trade, competition from licensed clubs and heavy trade expenses'.<sup>147</sup> The lease of the New Tredegar cinema (renamed the Victory Cinema) was subsequently taken-on by Patrick Walsh of the Halfway Hotel, Pengam but four years later he too was made bankrupt with liabilities of £553 and assets of just £12. Walsh attributed the business failure to 'the trade depression, heavy overhead charges and lack of capital'.<sup>148</sup> It is worth reiterating here the strong role that publicans played in film exhibition (as described in Chapter Four). Gareth Williams writes that for many years publicans had been 'traditional dispensers of sociability' and from the nineteenth century had diversified into a range

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<sup>146</sup> BT31/20479, Board of Trade papers, The National Archives.

<sup>147</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 19<sup>th</sup> January 1924.

<sup>148</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book 1929.

of commercial entertainments including ‘circus management, moveable theatres, pantomime and eventually music hall’.<sup>149</sup>

The frequency and ease with which leases were traded is illustrated by an action tried in the Chancery Division. Bert Richards, proprietor of the Palace cinema at Mountain Ash struck a deal to transfer the lease of the cinema (which he described as ‘a little gold mine’) to Rudolph Abse during a chance meeting on a train to Cardiff. Abse subsequently sued for breach of contract as Richards had been unable to effect the transfer as the lease was in the name of his wife (he being an un-discharged bankrupt).<sup>150</sup> Leased cinemas were also sometimes sublet in contravention of the lease conditions. For example, the Tredegar Palace Company Ltd sued Humphrey Williams in the High Court in July 1922 for breach of the covenants of his tenancy at the Palace cinema. The company claimed he had ‘failed to keep the cinema in good repair and keep it open as a cinema and a theatre’. Williams’ counter claim was that he had done his best to ‘increase and extend the carrying capacity, popularity and reputation of the theatre’ and had (without consent) underlet the premises to try and make ends meet. In spite of his ‘best efforts’, he had no option but to shut the cinema because of the economic impact of the strike. The Tredegar Palace Company Limited was awarded £999 in damages.<sup>151</sup>

Leases were frequently sold for less than their purchase price. Agnes Frances, for example, bought the lease of the Empire cinema, Llanbradach for £6,000 taking out a £4,000 mortgage to support the purchase. She subsequently got into financial difficulty and the mortgagees took possession of the cinema selling her equity to Juan Antonio Gomez for just £750. Seemingly undeterred, she later took on the lease of the Palace cinema Caerphilly paying nothing for the lease but putting £300 into the business.<sup>152</sup>

The high turnover in cinema ownership and management reflects the economic turbulence of the inter-war years. By way of illustration, the lease of the

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<sup>149</sup> Gareth Williams, “‘How’s the tenors in Dowlais?’: Hegemony, Harmony and Popular Culture in England and Wales 1600-1900”, *Llafur* 5.1 (1998).

<sup>150</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors’ Association Year Book, 1929.

<sup>151</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors’ Association Year Book, 1923.

<sup>152</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors’ Association Year Book, 1923.

afore-mentioned cinema at Llanbradach changed hands six times in nine years, the cinema at Ystrad Mynach had five different leasees over nine years and the Cosy Cinema at Pontlloftyn Institute changed hands three times in twelve months.<sup>153</sup>

Although the Withers brothers went on to establish one of the largest cinema circuits in south Wales, they too were subject to this economic turbulence - from the time Jackson-Withers arrived in south Wales in 1906 to c1920 he acquired and relinquished the leases of least six cinemas/theatres in South Wales keeping some of them for less than twelve months.

### **The emergence of cinema circuits**

Economic conditions were ideal for the consolidation or merger of cinemas into 'circuits'. Many cinema companies and leasees were eager to cut their losses and sell on their businesses often at 'bargain basement' prices. For those who could afford to expand their interests, the operation of a circuit offered many advantages. It was possible to negotiate preferential rental terms from film hire companies which not only reduced costs,<sup>154</sup> but also made it easier for cinema companies to meet their British film quotas. Also, if circuit cinemas were in the same town or neighbourhood, proprietors were in a position to manage the local market, including competition between venues. They controlled admission prices thereby avoiding the price deflation that so often accompanied competitive market environments and minimised competition between cinemas by differentiating what they had to offer patrons as far as the local market would permit. Cinemas varied in terms of admission charges, programmes (for example, the balance between shorts and features, the inclusion of news reels and live acts), the number of daily shows and the level of comfort provided. Although the south Wales valleys had very few of the so-called 'super cinemas' that sprang up elsewhere in the UK in the 1920s and 1930s, most towns had a range of different cinema offerings from the cheap 'fleapit,' sometimes still showing silent films, to the more luxurious 'first run' cinema which was wired for sound. Audrey Field writes about 'the luxury cinema, all pomp and splendor; the "dump", as

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<sup>153</sup> Register of music and dancing licenses 1915-1947, Caerphilly Licensing Sessions, Lower Division, Glamorgan Record Office, reference PSCAEL0/213: *Merthyr Express*, 13<sup>th</sup> February 1914; *Monmouth Guardian* 20<sup>th</sup> March 1914; *Merthyr Express* 5<sup>th</sup> February 1915.

<sup>154</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1939.

some people called the run-of-the-mill cinema; the “bug hutch” and the “flea pit”, but insists that these were ‘terms of endearment not derision’.<sup>155</sup>

By segmenting the market in this way cinema proprietors sought to maximize their revenues. By 1920 Jackson-Withers was running all three cinemas in Bargoed. The Palace cinema, opened in 1910 by a number of Bargoed businessmen, had been leased a number of times before Jackson-Withers acquired it in around 1917.<sup>156</sup> A couple of years later, Jackson-Withers acquired the Hanbury cinema which had been opened in 1914 alongside the Hanbury Hotel on Trafalgar Square. At this time, the New Hall theatre was primarily a theatre venue, only occasionally showing films. It became a full-time cinema and the premier film venue in Bargoed in the late 1940s,<sup>157</sup> although from the late 1920s it had moved primarily to film exhibition.<sup>158</sup> The New Hall building also boasted a ballroom and a café that could accommodate two hundred diners. It seems that the Withers soon realized the advantages of creating a local monopoly and as failing businesses came onto the market throughout the 1920s and 1930s they were able to replicate the Bargoed model in other towns. In 1920 the Withers owned three cinemas in Bargoed (and possibly also cinemas in Nelson and Abercynon); by 1940, some twenty years later, they owned over thirty cinemas in the south Wales valleys.

Alfred Withers’ move to Bargoed in the early 1920s for medical reasons undoubtedly had an impact on the company’s capacity to expand. Alfred had provided legal support to the business whilst working as a solicitor in London and had temporarily taken on the day-to-day management of the theatres and cinemas whilst Jackson-Withers served in the forces during World War One. However, his permanent move to Bargoed meant that he was able to take a much more active role, applying his business and legal acumen to the strategic expansion of the business.

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<sup>155</sup> Field, *Picture Palace*, p. 128.

<sup>156</sup> An advertisement in the Bargoed Journal, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1917 announced that the New Hall Theatre and Palace cinema were being run jointly.

<sup>157</sup> Gellgaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/39. The New Hall theatre did not apply for a dramatic license after 1948.

<sup>158</sup> Gelligaer UDC records, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/25. A condition of the dramatic license was that plays were staged for at least 12 weeks of the 12 month license period, and so by this time the theatre had more or less moved over to full-time film exhibition.

The first major acquisition in the late 1920s/early 1930s was of all five cinemas in the town of Abertillery. The Withers brothers acquired four theatres/cinemas (the Pavilion, which became their head quarters, the Express, New Metropole and Gaiety) within a year or so of each other and set up Abertillery Theatres Ltd in 1926 as a vehicle for their management.<sup>159</sup> In 1931 they added the Palace cinema to their Abertillery portfolio.<sup>160</sup> The trigger for their incursion into Abertillery appears to be the opportunity to acquire the Pavilion and Express theatres. The Tilneys, a well-established family of theatrical entrepreneurs, had run the cinemas since around 1912 along with the Market Hall in Ebbw Vale, the Olympia in Newport and the Coliseum, Cardiff. The company, Tilney Kinemas Ltd, ran into financial difficulty in the mid 1920s, and it is likely that they decided to concentrate on their more lucrative Newport and Cardiff operations. The rationalization seems to have paid off as the Tilneys' company went on to be very successful, developing the Capitol cinema in Cardiff, which at the time was one of the largest purpose built cinemas in Europe with a seating capacity of around 2,800, and surviving until the mid 1960s. When it went into voluntary liquidation in 1965 the company had assets worth £355,000 and was able to pay its shareholders £2 13s in the pound.<sup>161</sup> The deal between the Tilney family and the Withers brothers may have been brokered by H. Victor Davies.

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<sup>159</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Year Book, 1927

<sup>160</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Year Book, 1932

<sup>161</sup> BT31/25828/166596, BT31/41088/158404 Board of Trade papers, The National Archives.

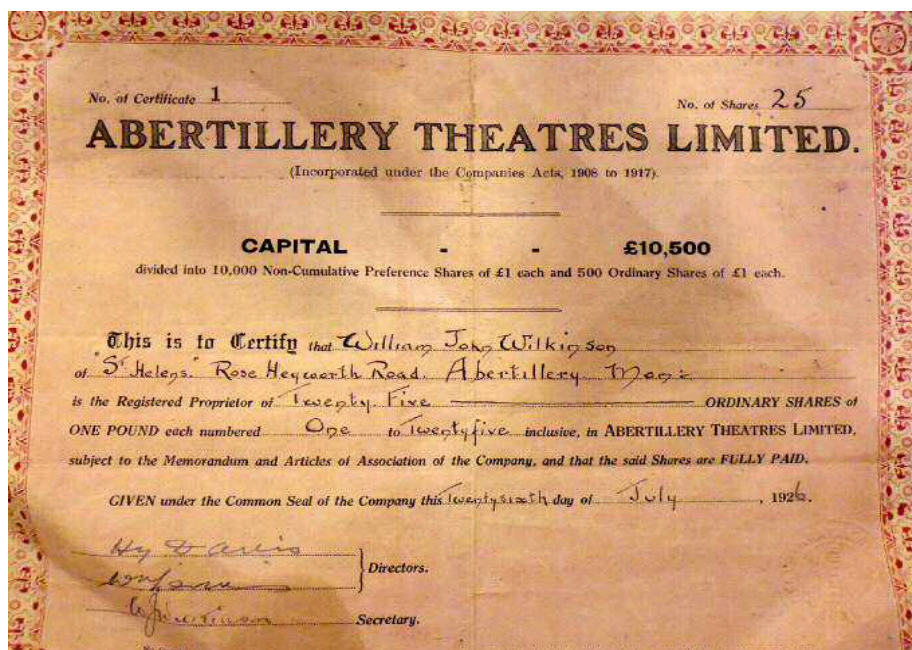


Figure 18 The first share certificate to be issued by Abertillery Theatres Ltd. (Source: papers in possession of author)

H. Victor Davies ran the Newbridge Public Hall until the late 1920s, sat on the South Wales and Monmouthshire branch of the CEA along with Alfred Withers and two members of the Tilney family, and had a brother who lived in Abertillery.<sup>162</sup> Shortly after the formation of Abertillery Theatres Ltd, the CEA Year book lists him as chair of directors of the company, and both Alfred Withers and Albert Jackson-Withers as directors.<sup>163</sup> H. Victor Davies had an unusual background for a cinema proprietor having been a Baptist Minister in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire before moving to South Wales.<sup>164</sup> The Withers' final cinema acquisition in Abertillery was the Palace cinema, developed in 1911 and only two years later sold to the business men behind the development of the Palace cinema in Bargoed. However, their involvement was short-lived as in 1915 their company Abertillery Electric Theatre (1913) Company Ltd was dissolved with creditors receiving only 5s 8d in the pound.<sup>165</sup> The fate of the cinema is unknown between 1915 and the late 1920s, but in 1928 Laura Doris Abse took out a 21 year lease on the cinema for £2,210 a year although three years later in 1931 she sub-leased the cinema to Alfred Withers.

<sup>162</sup> Phillip Wakely, *Spellbound in Darkness: The Cinema in Monmouthshire 1895 – 2015*, unpublished paper (2015); Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association year books.

<sup>163</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1931.

<sup>164</sup> Phillip Wakely, *Spellbound in Darkness: The Cinema in Monmouthshire 1895 – 2015*, unpublished paper (2015).

<sup>165</sup> BT31/13564 Board of Trade papers, The National Archives.

The largest business expansion of all occurred in the 1930s as yet more theatres and cinemas ran into financial difficulties and the Withers were able to broker beneficial acquisition deals. During this time the business also received a management boost when Julian Hodge became its accountant with a retainer of £500 a year. For a number of years Alfred had been encouraging Jackson-Withers, who was ‘a trifle casual about some of the formalities of his affairs’, to merge the cinema interests into single company, or at least a single company for all cinemas located in a single town. At his first meeting with Hodge, Alfred Withers announced uncompromisingly, ‘I don’t want you to tell me that you think you can do it. I want you to tell me you know you can do it’. Julian Hodge succeeded in restructuring the business and thereafter was closely involved with the Withers brothers both personally and professionally until the brothers’ deaths in the 1960s. Figure 19 shows a Christmas card sent by Julian Hodge to Alfred Withers and his family. During the 1930s the business received additional management and development capacity when Alfred’s son Alan qualified as a solicitor and, initially working out of a law office at High Holburn (where his father had previously worked), took on some of the legal work associated with cinema acquisitions. In 1930 Alfred’s daughter Maisie married Francis Cam, the electrician at the New Hall Theatre, who later went on to play an important role in the Withers’ business.

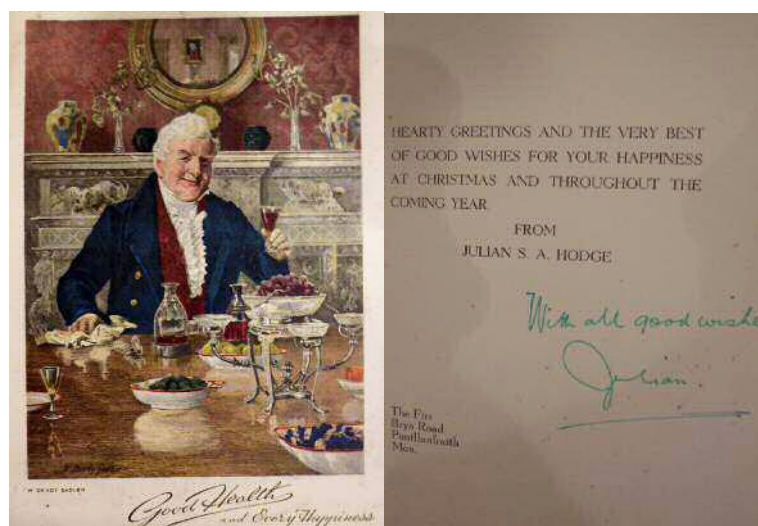


Figure 19 Christmas card from Julian Hodge to Alfred Withers and family (Source: papers in possession of author)



As an aside, there is every reason to believe that Alfred viewed the marriage between Maisie and Francis Cam as an unsuitable match. Since moving to Bargoed in the early 1920s he had been keen to perpetuate the comfortable middle class advantages that he and his family had enjoyed in London. He moved into one of the largest houses in the town, Oaklands Hall (Figure 20), and sent his only son Alan to St Paul's school, London. His (at least initial) discomfort at his daughter's choice of husband is suggested by the fact he drew up a marriage settlement ring-fencing his daughter's (prospective) assets.<sup>166</sup> However, in the event, the marriage was to be an enduring one and Cam went on to become an important business asset.<sup>167</sup> By 1935 he was general manager of the Bargoed cinemas, thus freeing up Alfred Withers to further develop the business.



Figure 20 Oaklands Hall  
(Source: papers in possession of author)

The next major business acquisition occurred in 1932 when the Withers took over all three cinemas in Ebbw Vale, once again owned by the Tilney family, plus a cinema in nearby Cwm. The brothers set up Ebbw Vale Theatres Ltd as an ownership and management vehicle.<sup>168</sup> The Tilneys had leased two pre-existing public buildings,

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<sup>166</sup> Document in possession of author.

<sup>167</sup> Maisie M. Withers married Francis A. Cam in September 1930. The couple had two children and the marriage lasted until Francis Cam's death in 1980.

<sup>168</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1933.

the Market Hall theatre<sup>169</sup> and the Palace cinema, from around 1911 and a few years later acquired the White House cinema from a Merthyr based company that had been set up in 1912 specifically to develop a purpose built cinema and had struggled to make a profit. In 1920 all three of the Tilney cinemas were brought within the auspices of Palace Theatres (Ebbw Vale) and it is likely that the Withers leased or bought the Ebbw Vale cinemas from this company.

Whilst Alfred Withers spearheaded the consolidation of the Abertillery circuit, it seems that Jackson-Withers took the lead in the acquisition of the Ebbw Vale properties with the legal support of Alfred's son, Alan Withers. However, it appears that the major pre-occupation of Jackson Withers during the 1930s was the acquisition of several cinemas in the Swansea area under the auspices of a new company, South Wales Cinemas Ltd. The circuit, established in 1935, acquired the Albert Hall, Carlton Cinema and Picture House in Swansea, the Gnoll and Windsor Cinemas in Neath and the Palace cinema in Ammanford.<sup>170</sup> The late 1930s also saw a further round of acquisitions in Pontypool, Blackwood, Newport and Pontypridd.<sup>171</sup>

Miskell has argued that the number and size of cinema circuits in Wales remained more or less constant during the inter-war years, basing his conclusion primarily on CEA Year Book entries for the period.<sup>172</sup> However, the CEA Year Books are misleading in this respect as they list cinema circuits without acknowledging that many are conjointly owned. For example, the Withers family owned at least seven circuits by 1939 (ranging in size from three to seven cinemas) plus at least two single venue companies.<sup>173</sup> Although it was Alfred Withers' ambition that Julian Hodge would facilitate the consolidation of their cinema holdings, it seems that this was only partially achieved. It is only possible to speculate on why the multiple chains were not brought together under the umbrella of a single company. Multiple circuits may

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<sup>169</sup> The Withers demolished the Market Hall theatre/cinema in the 1930s and replaced it with a new build cinema, the Plaza.

<sup>170</sup> The Ammanford cinema was no longer part of the circuit by 1937.

<sup>171</sup> 1935, New Royal Theatre and Park cinema, Pontypool (Pontypool Theatres Ltd), 1937-1939, Capitol, Palace and Maxime cinemas, Blackwood (Blackwood Entertainments (1939) Ltd), 1937 Capital cinema, Newport (Gwent Theatres Ltd), 1938 County Theatre, Pontypridd and 1939 Palladium, Pontypridd

<sup>172</sup> Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*, p.60.

<sup>173</sup> Hanbury, Palace and New Hall Cinemas Ltd, Welsh Halls Ltd, Abertillery Theatres Ltd, Eddw Vale Theatres Ltd, Pontypool Theatres Ltd, South Wales Cinemas Ltd, Blackwood Entertainments (1939) Ltd, Gwent Theatres Ltd, County Theatre Pontypridd Ltd and Palladium Pontypridd Ltd.

have allowed the Withers brothers to more easily sub-divide responsibilities, and the identification of circuits with specific towns (for example, Abertillery Theatres Ltd, Ebbw Vale Theatres Ltd) may also have helped to sustain local connections, although, as we shall see below, these had significantly weakened during the inter-war years. The consolidation of 'singleton' cinemas into circuits, together with the harsh economic climate of the 1920s and 1930s, inevitably had an impact on the extent to which cinema proprietors could engage with local communities and the methods they employed.

### **From civic courtship to legal challenge**

We have seen in Chapter Six that the pre 1920 period was characterized by the 'courtship' of community leaders and high-profile contributions to community-building causes by cinema proprietors. During the 1920s and 1930s, however, relationships with civic leaders became more distant and charitable donations were largely aimed at relieving local distress. The severity of the interwar economic depression bolstered the importance of working men's institutes in supporting the various relief groups that had been set up to meet local welfare needs. The shift in Bargoed was particularly marked since the Institute there only opened in 1913 and prior to this the New Hall theatre and the Palace cinema had been two of the town's most important charitable benefactors. Although the New Hall theatre and Palace and Hanbury cinemas continued to have a charitable role (for example, the New Hall theatre regularly hosted boxing tournaments in support of the local Canteen Fund) the Working Men's Institute became the hub of relief efforts, with local churches and chapels also making an important contribution.

Relationships between cinema proprietors and civic leaders became more remote during the interwar years for a number of reasons. Importantly, local government had become a much more complex and professional business, driven far less by associational relationships and priorities. Local government responsibilities had grown considerably and included public health, housing, roads, sanitation, bus services, fire protection, licensing and recreation. This expansion in remit is indicated by the increase in the number of Gelligaer UDC committees and sub-committees from

ten in 1920 to sixteen in 1937,<sup>174</sup> and by the increase in local authority expenditure. Between 1920 and 1930, annual expenditure by Glamorganshire local authorities increased by 73% from £1.3m to £2.2m.<sup>175</sup> With the ascendancy of Labour during the inter-war years, there was also a loosening of the formerly close relationship between chapel and council chamber. Whilst many churches and chapels in the south Wales valleys were actively involved in relief efforts, D. Densil Morgan has written that ‘for all their social gospelling rhetoric, it had become a matter of principle that the churches should remain aloof from political partisanship even when injustice was rife’.<sup>176</sup> Robert Pope makes the same point arguing that Welsh Nonconformity ‘sought to be less political at a time when the working class was claiming its political rights’.<sup>177</sup> This bid for separation did elicit criticism. When the President of the Welsh Baptist Association of East Glamorgan deplored the participation in public life of ministers of the gospel at the association’s annual Gymanfa, a ‘young disciple’ wrote to the local newspaper decrying the stance. He wrote that ‘too long have we divided life into watertight compartments with “specialists” and “experts” (the curse of our age) in sole charge of the various divisions. It is high time that we commenced to view life as Jesus viewed it, as one great entity, calling for harmony, peace and love to understand and live it’. He asked whether the President was ‘afraid that ministers might bring too much of the spirit of Christ into the everyday life of the common people’.<sup>178</sup> As a consequence of its political detachment, Nonconformity lost much of its community status and influence although, as we shall see below, Sunday opening continued to be a crusading issue.

The consolidation of cinemas into circuits also made it impractical for cinema proprietors to develop close relationships with local civic leaders. When the Withers owned three cinemas in Bargoed it was relatively easy to cultivate close local connections, but by 1940 they were running over thirty cinemas across more than ten locations and even with enhanced management capacity it would have been impossible to give local relationships the same close attention. Personality was also a

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<sup>174</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, references UDG/C/1/15 and UDG/C/1/33.

<sup>175</sup> John Williams, *Digest of Welsh Historical Statistics, Volume 2* (Cardiff, 1985).

<sup>176</sup> D. Densil Morgan, *The Span of the Cross: Christian Religion and Society in Wales 1914-2000* (Cardiff, 2011), p.154.

<sup>177</sup> Robert Pope, *Building Jerusalem: Non-conformity, Labour and the Social Question in Wales, 1906-39* (Cardiff, 1998), p.157.

<sup>178</sup> *Caerphilly Journal*, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1932.

factor. Whilst Jackson-Withers relished the public relations role of the showman, his brother Alfred, a ‘quiet and scholarly figure’,<sup>179</sup> found the public-facing role of the cinema entrepreneur far more challenging. Following Alfred’s care-taking stint in Bargoed when his brother was serving in the forces, the *Bargoed Journal* wrote that ‘without in anyway disparaging the efforts of the war time management of the New Hall, it is now abundantly proved with the return from the army of Mr Jackson Withers that he is the mastermind for securing the best possible programmes’.<sup>180</sup> In 1928, when Alfred had already been living in Bargoed for several years, he wrote on the back of a photograph of his car ‘Little A – our only friend in Bargoed (Figure 21)’.



Figure 21 ‘Little A - our only friend in Bargoed’  
(Source: papers in possession of author)

At the time Alfred was embroiled in a bad-tempered and prolonged dispute with Gelligaer UDC over Sunday opening. In 1922 the Council had reinstated six-day licenses and, whilst we cannot know the precise reasons for this reversal of official attitudes, it is possible to speculate.<sup>181</sup> In November of the proceeding year the council decided to consider all dramatic and cinematograph licenses annually in March of each year. Previously licenses had expired at different times throughout the year and renewals were decided on an ad hoc basis. The consideration of all licenses together is likely to have concentrated attention on the issue of Sunday opening and made it easier for religious opponents to stage an effective challenge. Further, by 1922

<sup>179</sup> Timothy O’Sullivan, *Julian Hodge: A Biography* (London, Boston and Henley, 1981).

<sup>180</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1919.

<sup>181</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/16.

Jackson-Withers had moved to Cardiff leaving Alfred Withers in charge of the day to day running of the Bargoed cinemas and theatre. Whilst Jackson-Withers undoubtedly benefited from the relationships he had fostered with Gelligaer UDC councillors when license issues arose prior to 1920, Alfred Withers could not rely on old alliances (in 1921 only three councillors had been on the council since 1911<sup>182</sup>) and new alliances were difficult to forge due partly to Alfred's personality and legalistic approach, but also because of major changes to how local government was administered. When Jackson-Withers was running the Bargoed venues, there was considerable overlap of membership and interests between the Gelligaer UDC and other community organisations such as the Chamber of Trade. During the interwar years, however, previously coalescent interests became more detached and self-serving. When, for example, Bargoed and District Chamber of Trade wrote to Gelligaer UDC inviting the council to send representatives to their meetings, the Council said they could not accede to the request and that when matters of mutual interest arose the Chamber of Trade could send a deputation to the relevant council meeting.<sup>183</sup> This contrasts sharply to the pre-1920 period when, as Chapter Six describes, there was considerable overlap of membership between the Council and the Chamber of Trade.

Alfred Withers' relationship with Gelligaer UDC appears to have been a fraught one. The on-going confusion over the respective powers of a dramatic as opposed to cinematograph license provided cover for Alfred Withers to continue to show films on a Sunday at the New Hall theatre. The Withers also owned the Palace and Hanbury cinemas in Bargoed but these venues respected their six day cinematograph licenses presumably because the large capacity New Hall theatre was able to meet the demand for Sunday evening entertainments. The issue came to a head in 1930 when the council, clearly weary of the constant contraventions of the Sunday cinema ban, voted not to issue the New Hall theatre with a license of *any* kind.<sup>184</sup> After months of wrangling, the dramatic license was reinstated but only on condition that plays were staged for at least twelve weeks of the twelve-month license period,

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<sup>182</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/16.

<sup>183</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/39.

<sup>184</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/25.

the council clearly cognizant of Alfred Withers using a dramatic license to circumvent the Sunday ban.<sup>185</sup>

On the face of it, the 1932 Sunday Entertainments Act should have opened the door for Sunday opening in Wales, and Alfred Withers was certainly optimistic that it would do so. The Act set out procedures to be followed to determine whether there was a public mandate for Sunday opening. For urban district councils the procedure was for a public meeting of electors to be called. If at that meeting objections to the proposal for Sunday opening was raised by a hundred electors or one twentieth of the electorate, whichever was less, a poll of electors was to be held. If the result of the poll was in favour of Sunday opening, application was made to the Secretary of State for an order that would have permanent effect.<sup>186</sup> Alfred Withers was swift to take advantage of the new provisions and applied to Gelligaer UDC for a seven-day cinematograph license for the New Hall Theatre in October 1932, finally confirming his intentions to discontinue the venue as a theatre. The seven-day license was granted for three months with a majority of just one.<sup>187</sup> However, the council had acted outside the powers bestowed by the 1932 Act that required a public meeting and also possibly an electoral poll before Sunday licenses could be issued. Following intervention by the Secretary of State (at the behest of the Bargoed and Gilfach Council of Evangelical Free Churches) six-day licenses were restored to the district.<sup>188</sup>

However, Alfred Withers was reluctant to accept this position and bombarded the council with applications for seven-day licenses, eventually resorting to legal action when the council refused to accede. He applied for and received a Rule Nisi that ordered the council to hear and determine his application for permission to open the New Hall for cinema exhibitions on Sundays. A special meeting of the council was called on March 1<sup>st</sup> 1934 to discuss the issue and it was resolved by twelve votes to eight that the council should ‘defend the proceedings and show cause against the Rule Nisi’.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/25.

<sup>186</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors’ Association Year Book, 1932.

<sup>187</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/28.

<sup>188</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/28.

<sup>189</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/29.

The council won the action against Alfred Withers and this appears to have settled their long-term attitude to Sunday opening more than any other factor. Their argument was that there was insufficient demand for Sunday opening to justify them going to the expense of a public ballot, and that without them having gone through the procedures set out in the 1932 Act, they had no powers to grant seven day licenses. This simplified the decision making process enormously. The stock response to applications for Sunday opening was that the council did not possess the necessary powers. In 1938 Alfred Withers attempted to circumvent the situation at the New Hall by applying for a dramatic license which was typically granted for seven days. The council, by this time fully alert to this tactic, granted a dramatic license but specified that it was for six days only.<sup>190</sup> By the 1940s Alfred Withers had abandoned any pretense of running a theatre at the New Hall and had settled for a six-day cinematograph license.

In spite of the skirmishes over Sunday opening that went on well into the 1950s, by the inter-war years cinema was a firm feature on the leisure landscape and public approbation had shifted to other entertainment forms such as dancing. An editorial in the *Merthyr Express* in September 1926, for example, asked whether ‘dancing is not overdone and what can be done to restrict it’. The article goes on to say that ‘every night of the week is taken up by dances and “long nights” are frequently organised...Late hours spent in a close, stuffy and often unhealthy atmosphere undermines health and later will dull young people’s intellect and have a marked effect on their lives’.<sup>191</sup> In Ebbw Vale, the popularity of dancing caused a considerable local backlash, especially towards the hosting of dances by ‘two religious orders’. One letter to the *Merthyr Express* called on the authorities to stem this ‘infection of mad pleasures’, to put a stop to the ‘perpetual giddy whirling and jigging’ and warned that in a few years time the only inheritance of Ebbw Vale will be a population of worthless citizens... Ballroom dancing has absolutely nothing to build and enrich the intellect. It is the butterflying of the best years of youth away, leaving its devotees badly handicapped for the sterner battles of life through a

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<sup>190</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/34.

<sup>191</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 25<sup>th</sup> September 1926.



consequent inertia of the intellect'.<sup>192</sup> In Bargoed, criticism was more muted even though there too a number of churches and chapels had jumped on the dance bandwagon to raise funds for various causes. For example, St Gwladys' Church organised a number of charitable whist drives and dances, one held at the Workmen's Institute in March 1928 raised £31 for 'a popular young town's man who had been laid aside with illness for some time'.<sup>193</sup> Occasionally, someone was banned from attending Bargoed Institute dances for a prescribed period because of inappropriate behaviour and in March 1926 the committee felt compelled to put up a large print notice warning dancers that 'No two gents to dance together', but overall the 'dancing craze' was assimilated into an already varied social scene.<sup>194</sup>

## Conclusion

By the interwar years cinema had become less of a cultural frontier and more a mainstream entertainment and the need to cultivate public opinion and court local civic leaders had receded. Although the battle over Sunday opening persisted, it had lost much of its vitality and had all the hallmarks of a set piece. Whilst church and chapel had to a certain extent reconnected with local communities through their distress-relief activities, there had been a fundamental shift in base-line attitudes.<sup>195</sup> The 'world denying' character of Nonconformity had alienated many working class people who were becoming increasingly politically aware. On the commercial front, the harsh economic conditions of the inter-war years had resulted in the failure of many cinema operations, opening up opportunities for expansion for those cinema proprietors who could successfully transition from showman to businessman. Whilst Jackson-Withers' showman and public relations skills had been essential to the early establishment of the family business, Alfred Withers' business and legal expertise, and the close association with Julian Hodge, were indispensable to the growth of their cinema circuit during the inter-war years.

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<sup>192</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 18<sup>th</sup> February 1928.

<sup>193</sup> *Merthyr Express*, 17<sup>th</sup> March 1928.

<sup>194</sup> Bargoed and District Workmen's Library and Institute minutes, March 16<sup>th</sup> 1926, South Wales Coalfield Collection, Swansea University, SWCC:MNA/1/4.

<sup>195</sup> In her M. A. Welsh History thesis, Hannah Price argues that Christianity was far from being a spent force during the inter-war years and that many denominations and religious organisations were involved in alleviating distress, "'Man's extremity and God's opportunity?': Christianity, social function and economic depression in inter-war south Wales' (Cardiff University, 2009).

## Chapter Eight

### **From community-bound culture to individual pleasures – cinema from the 1940s to 1970s**

*‘The tempo of life, especially in the entertainment world, is breathtaking. It has a fountain-like quality, with changing shapes and colours. The call for “something new,” “something fresh,” “something original” goes on all the time, and it taxes the strength of those responsible for keeping the masses amused and entertained.’*

A reference to television in *The Worker in an Affluent Society; Family Life and Industry*, Ferdinand Zweig (1961)

Whilst High Street, Bargoed was no Carnaby Street,<sup>1</sup> the town experienced major socio-economic and cultural changes during the period following the Second World War. Over a period of some thirty or so years, south Wales valleys communities bound tightly together by colliery, chapel and place were transformed into an increasingly pluralist, mobile and consumer driven society. The transformative catalyst was the contraction of the coal industry that began in earnest during the 1960s. The first wave of change was largely economic involving a fundamental restructuring of the area’s industrial and occupational base, increased unemployment and a general weakening of the local economy. Demographic, social and cultural changes were relatively quick to follow and were to have a lasting impact on leisure habits.

However, the impetus for change in leisure demand and provision over this period did not derive entirely from local or regional causes. Just as technological advancement was the wave that took cinema into every south Wales town, so it was the force that sped its decline. In July 1948, Gelligaer Urban District Council (UDC) gave permission for the laying of a Redifusion cable in Bargoed,<sup>2</sup> and some twenty years later the new medium of television had supplanted cinema as the entertainment of choice. The figures for cinema’s decline are stark. In 1953, for example, there were forty-three cinemas in Monmouthshire; less than twenty years later, in 1972, only

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<sup>1</sup> Although in the 1970s the town did have a women’s fashion shop called Fab Gear!

<sup>2</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/44.

twelve remained, a reduction of 72%.<sup>3</sup> And yet the years following the Second World War were not ones of unmitigated decline for the medium. Indeed, cinema attendances were at their peak during the 1940s and early 1950s. However, increased attendance levels did not translate into increased profits. Admission prices remained stubbornly low and ever increasing regulatory and tax demands increased running costs. The flurry of industry exits described in Chapter Seven continued unabated and the Withers brothers continued to take advantage of these economic difficulties to expand their cinema business. This chapter describes the socio-economic, political and cultural changes that dominated the period from c1940 to the early 1970s, in particular the impact that these changes had on leisure habits. It explores how the cinema industry was restructured in response to these sweeping changes, including how the Withers' business evolved from a family run operation to part of a much bigger corporate conglomerate under the control of the financier Julian Hodge.

Although the period was characterized by major shifts in leisure habits, only one chapter is devoted to this period because many of the forces that drove these changes, such as the secularization and socio-economic diversification of communities and the weakening of local associational networks, were already in evidence during the inter-war period and have been discussed in some detail in the preceding chapter.

### **Communities in flux**

During the three decades from World War Two to the mid 1970s, the south Wales valleys experienced considerable social, economic and cultural change. Compared with the economic nadir of the inter-war years, the 1940s and 1950s was a relatively benign period for most valleys communities. Whilst the 1940s were years of national austerity with on-going rationing, power cuts and budgetary constraints,<sup>4</sup> employment and income levels in the south Wales valleys improved albeit they were still below UK averages. R. Merfyn Jones argues that during the 1940s and 1950s Wales still possessed a 'highly organised, democratic working class culture blessed with

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<sup>3</sup> Based on license records included in an unpublished paper, Phillip Wakely, *Spellbound in Darkness: The Cinema in Monmouthshire 1895 – 2015* (2015).

<sup>4</sup> David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain 1945-48: A world to build* (London, 2007).

articulate expression.<sup>5</sup> Francis and Smith confer – indeed they suggest that the 1950s represented the zenith of valleys working class culture that had its roots in earlier decades:-

*That faraway era before mass pit closures, bingo, social drinking and a television in every home. It was the golden era of the Miners' Welfare Movement when many mining communities believed that they were building little socialist islands by their own enthusiastic voluntary labour: a time of carefully tended bowling greens, sparkling dance halls, shining new pithead baths and Welfare Halls with cinema-scope screens showing such delights as *Quo Vadis*, *The Robe*, and *The River of No Return*.<sup>6</sup>*

However, the 'mono-industrial society' that characterized the south Wales valleys was an unstable foundation for post war reconstruction. As market demand and profit margins for coal contracted, the prospects for many south Wales collieries became increasingly precarious. Although the nationalization of the coal industry in 1946 was generally welcomed, it was to lead to a gradual rationalization of the industry that saw employment across the south Wales coalfields shrink from 115,500 in 1946, to less than 100,000 in 1959 and 50,000 in 1969.<sup>7</sup> The number of employees at Bargoed colliery declined from 2700 in 1915, to 1048 in 1947 and 792 in 1961 (a decrease of some 70% over fifty years).<sup>8</sup> Efforts to broaden the economic base of the south Wales valleys to create alternative employment opportunities had limited success. Increasingly workers were obliged to travel further afield to secure employment at the diminishing number of collieries that remained open or in entirely new employment sectors.

The rapid contraction of the south Wales coalfield in the 1960s had major economic reverberations. Younger, more skilled miners tended to leave the industry and take up more lucrative and secure employment elsewhere, whilst those that remained were transferred to unfamiliar pits losing 'old comradeship and customs' and forced to make longer journeys to and from work, sometimes extending the

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<sup>5</sup> R. Merfyn Jones, 'Social Change in Wales since 1945', in David Dunkerley and Andrew Thompson (eds.), *Wales Today* (Cardiff, 1999), p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Hywel Francis and Dai Smith, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (Cardiff, 1998), p. 448

<sup>7</sup> Chris Williams, *Capitalism, Community and Conflict: the South Wales coalfield 1898-1947* (Cardiff, 1998), p.25.

<sup>8</sup> Gelligaer Historical Society, *Bargoed and Gilfach: A local history* (Pontypool, 2011), p. 90. When the colliery closed in 1977 there were just 360 men employed.

working day by as much as three hours or so.<sup>9</sup> Another pivotal change was a significant increase in female employment. Due to their reliance on heavy industries the south Wales valleys had traditionally been characterized by relatively low levels of female participation in the labour market – for example, in 1951 only 24% of women were in paid employment. The shrinkage of traditional industries allied with the opening up employment opportunities in lighter industries and the service sector led to a significant increase in female employment, and to what R. Merfyn Jones describes as a ‘revolution of the most far reaching significance’.<sup>10</sup>

These major economic transformations had important social and cultural implications, most importantly the weakening of the community bonding agents of chapel and religion. Morgan writes that ‘older, more communitarian values, often bound to language and focused in communities of faith, were finding themselves under increasing strain’.<sup>11</sup> The greater geographical mobility of south Wales valleys residents weakened the membership base of many Nonconformist chapels. Whilst Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism are ‘filling station religions’ in that their members can call in easily at any church of the denomination on a Sunday and transfer their attendance easily from one parish to another, the Nonconformist is more tied to a specific chapel. ‘Strongly embedded in their locality, with a severely localized membership, such chapels tend to flourish in situations of strong residential stability’.<sup>12</sup> They go into decline during periods of population flux and when associations with place are weakened by increased physical mobility. Further, as we have seen in Chapter Six, the reluctance of church and chapel to engage fully with the economic and social problems of the interwar years had already alienated many, especially young people, from formal religion. Morgan writes that ‘a younger generation, less enamored of the values of puritanism and highly sensitive to the ambiguities of the Non-conformist Conscience, its tendency to censoriousness, smugness and hypocrisy, and its obliviousness to broader social and economic

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<sup>9</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, pp. 453-455.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, ‘Social Change in Wales since 1945’, p.15

<sup>11</sup> D. Densil Morgan, *The Span of the Cross: Christian Religion and Society in Wales 1914-2000* (Cardiff, 2011), p. 207.

<sup>12</sup> Colin Rosser and Christopher Harris, *The Family and Social Change: A study of family and kinship in a South Wales Town* (London and New York, 1965), p.131.

questions' were not only turning their backs on religion but were also increasingly vocal in their criticisms.<sup>13</sup>

Between 1940 and 1970 the number of Baptist members in Glamorganshire decreased by 42% (from 50,000 to 29,000); the number of Calvinistic Methodist communicants declined by 51% (from 41,000 to 20,000); and the number of Congregationalist and Welsh Independent members declined by 44% (from 55,000 to 31,000).<sup>14</sup> As substantial as these reductions are, Morgan argues that they underestimate the extent to which communities had become disconnected from formal religion. He quotes a survey of an unnamed south Wales chapel, 'well served by its pastor and outwardly flourishing', that revealed a depressing state of affairs. For a variety of proffered reasons, two-fifths (44%) of its 324 members had not attended public worship during the previous twelve months. Curiously, a fifth (18%) of those not attending said it was because Sunday was a day of rest.<sup>15</sup> Rhys Davies in his memoir *My Wales* wrote that 'in these industrial regions, where the clumsy feet of the modern world have intruded...[the chapels] are becoming moribund'.<sup>16</sup>

During the 1940s, churches across the UK had five million attendances each week whilst cinemas had 40 million.<sup>17</sup> A Mass Observation study of the mining village of Blaina in Monmouthshire, undertaken in 1942, found small congregations in churches and chapels built to accommodate hundreds. For example, on a fine April morning a church, one of the largest religious buildings in the district, had a congregation of just eighteen. In the view of the 'observers', the 'whole service was taken quickly and largely as a matter of routine... people seemed unimpressed'. Later that same day a chapel designed to hold at least two hundred people had a congregation of fifteen women, two men and five children, although the 'singing was good, full and un-self conscious, and the congregation was attentive to the service, particularly to the sermon'.<sup>18</sup> R. Merfyn Jones writes that the 'virtual emasculation of Non-conformity as a real social force during the last four decades of the century was

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<sup>13</sup> Morgan, *The Span of the Cross*, p. 209.

<sup>14</sup> John Williams, *Digest of Welsh Statistics, Volume 2* (Cardiff, 1985).

The statistics for Congregationalist and Welsh Independent members are for 1939 (not 1940) and 1970.

<sup>15</sup> Morgan, *The Span of the Cross*, pp.110, 211.

<sup>16</sup> Rhys Davies, *My Wales* (London, 1937), pp. 119-120.

<sup>17</sup> David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain 1945-48: A world to build* (London, 2007), p.125.

<sup>18</sup> Mass observation File Report no. 1498, extract 166.

one of the most remarkable changes to affect the way in which the Welsh people lived'.<sup>19</sup>

Since Nonconformism and the Welsh language were so closely entwined, it is unsurprising that the extent of Welsh speaking also went into serious decline. In Glamorganshire, the total number of Welsh speakers (monoglot and bilingual) decreased by a third (33%) between 1901 and 1951 and by over a half (59%) between 1901 and 1971.<sup>20</sup> Religious affiliation and language are markers for much broader social changes that were spreading throughout the south Wales valleys. Largely static, inwardly focused communities with limited economic opportunities had become more outward looking and diverse in terms of occupation, income, culture and attitudes. A study of family and social change in Swansea, undertaken in the late 1950s/early 1960s, found that between the traditional middle class and traditional working class there had developed 'a substantial intermediate class of routine white-collar workers'. The authors estimated that almost two-fifths of Swansea's male population was located in this 'vague interstitial area between the two traditional classes'.<sup>21</sup> They also argued that the intermediate class was vitally important to social mobility and class dynamics. Whilst economic factors had previously been the dominant social differentiator within south Wales communities, increasing socio-economic diversity had led to a 'growing emphasis on cultural behavior as a means of social differentiation'.<sup>22</sup> The class structure had become a 'series of sub-cultures shading one into another and having a great deal in common so that it is exceptionally difficult in practice to say with any clarity where one begins and the other ends'.<sup>23</sup> However, the authors are firm in their assertion that this trend did not negate the on-going importance of class variations that were 'sufficiently contrasted and distinct at the extremes for the differences to be commonly recognised and accepted'.<sup>24</sup>

Whilst valleys communities did not have the socio-economic diversity of cities, they too became more culturally diverse during the years following the Second World War. Older cultural habits, rooted in chapel, pit and place, were being replaced

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<sup>19</sup> Jones, 'Social Change in Wales since 1945', p.18.

<sup>20</sup> John Williams, *Digest of Welsh Statistics, Volume 1* (Cardiff, 1985).

<sup>21</sup> T. Brennan, E.W. Cooney and H. Pollins, *Social Change in South-West Wales* (London, 1954), p. 94

<sup>22</sup> Brennan, Cooney and Pollins, *Social Change in South-West Wales*, p. 113.

<sup>23</sup> Brennan, Cooney and Pollins, *Social Change in South-West Wales*, p.114.

<sup>24</sup> Brennan, Cooney and Pollins, *Social Change in South-West Wales*, p.114.

by more individualized and geographically dispersed pursuits and pleasures. For many observers, the changing character of working men's institutes is emblematic of the deconstruction of the cultural apparatus of the valleys during the 1960s. R. Merfyn Jones writes that "many of the Welfare Halls, previously famous for their high level of cultural and political activity, their debates and libraries and dramas, become little more than drinking clubs and many amateur societies and voluntary associations which had previously blossomed within the cultural space they provided withered with them".<sup>25</sup> Although many of these changes were driven by financial necessity (working men's institutes inevitably lost income with the closure of an allied colliery), many observers felt that the 'strange metamorphosis' into drinking clubs had caused institutes to lose their way.<sup>26</sup> In his memoir, James Griffiths who was MP for Llanelli from 1936 to the late 1960s (and was the first Secretary of State for Wales in 1964), described the decline in traditional community based activities:-

*in the social and cultural life of valleys communities the most notable change is to be found is the decline in the membership of the Nonconformist chapels. In my boyhood the chapel was the centre of the life of the community. We all grew up under its wing. We learnt Welsh at the Sunday School, took part in the cantata, joined the choir and cultivated our gifts at the Young People's Guild. All of these are still there but their influence has weakened, whilst the 'clubs' multiply. There seems to be ample resources available to build palatial club buildings, and these are full every evening and crowded on Sundays. Even the miners welfare institutes...now find that they can only keep going by adding a bar to their other attractions.*<sup>27</sup>

Although many writers argue that it was the 1960s that heralded most socio-economic and cultural change, precursors to these transformations were evident many years earlier. In his study of Welsh and English coalfields conducted in 1947, Ferdynand Zweig found that 'choirs, dramatic societies, poetry and music clubs are not as popular as they used to be'. Rather miners' favourite pastimes included 'games (especially football), going to the cinema, going dancing and gambling (dog and horse racing, football pools etc)'.<sup>28</sup> The growing importance of commercially provided leisure forms is one reason why expenditure on recreation rose so significantly during the 1950s. Recreation was the fastest growing area of household expenditure between

<sup>25</sup> Jones, 'Social Change in Wales since 1945', p.18.

<sup>26</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, p. 454.

<sup>27</sup> James Griffiths, *Pages from Memory* (London, 1969), pp. 204-5.

<sup>28</sup> Ferdynand Zweig, *The Worker in an Affluent Society: Family life and industry* (London, 1961).



the 1930s and 1950s, and by the early 1950s recreation accounted for a larger proportion of household spending than any other category except food. Miskell writes that in Wales the rate of growth in recreation spending was faster than in the rest of Britain, but this is likely to be due to the base-level being the depression ridden 1930s.<sup>29</sup> Improved local transport meant that leisure seekers could venture beyond the confines of their home village/town. In Zweig's coalfields study undertaken in the late 1940s, a number of respondents attributed the loss of vitality in community-life to people travelling further afield. 'The buses have done that. You can move freely for a few pence and get any amusement you want outside the village'.<sup>30</sup> In 1945, Sydney T. Jones of Hengoed, a miner at Bargoed colliery, wrote to Manny Shinwell, Minister of Fuel and Power, to ask him to restore miners' priority on local bus services because they were being ousted by pleasure-seekers:-

*I am a South Wales miner, and I write to ask – not only for myself – but for several of my butties, that you use your good influence with the Ministry of Transport to get him to restore to us miners the travel priority on our local bus services, especially those of us who work on the afternoon shifts. I myself, having been home two weeks with flu and bronchitis through having to walk half a mile to the nearest bus stop from the colliery, and waiting about at the end of the queue for the last bus to our village, a mile and a half away, we find that at 10.30pm the queue is made up of half-drunks, picture-goers, dance hall riff-raff, and we who have been sweating our guts out at the coalface are left to shiver in the bitter cold wind and hear the bus conductor say 'Sorry, only three or four' as the case may be. Those types of pub crawlers can get home, but we miners have to walk through torrents of rain or snow storms across the fields over the mountains to get home about 11.30 pm, or near mid-night, and then perhaps we have to return in the morning to perform some special job.<sup>31</sup>*

Community-based activities were undermined not only by the greater ability and willingness of people to travel for their 'amusement', but also by the expansion in home-based recreation such as radio, television and popular journalism/literature. As Rosser and Harris wrote in 1965, 'the social and cultural horizons of the old industrial communities have expanded enormously. The walls of the traditional cohesive society, with its characteristic peasant culture (with Welsh and Nonconformity as the cement binding the whole together), have been breached in a hundred places'.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*, pp. 18 -19.

<sup>30</sup> Zweig, *The Worker in an Affluent Society*.

<sup>31</sup> David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain 1945-48: A world to build* (London, 2007), p.195.

<sup>32</sup> Colin Rosser and Christopher Harris, *The Family and Social Change: A study of family and kinship in a South Wales Town* (London and New York, 1965), p. 134.

Change in leisure habits accelerated during the 1960s due to an evolving employment market, increased household affluence and the emergence of a recognizable youth culture. For example, the move away from manual work meant that work was less physically demanding and workers had more energy and time for recreation; greater affluence meant that families had the resources to make their homes more comfortable and home life took on a new importance and vitality; the increase in car ownership facilitated more family trips out together; and young people increasingly developed their own interests and activities.

### **‘Determination is all very well...’ – the consequences for the cinema industry**

Whilst expenditure on recreation increased more than any other item of spending between the 1930s and 1950s, it was largely spending on tobacco and alcohol that accounted for this trend.<sup>33</sup> Cinema remained hugely popular, in fact levels of cinema attendance were 45% higher in 1952 than in 1932 but this was due largely to the frequent visits of cinema habitués whose film-going conventions kept many local cinemas afloat.<sup>34</sup> Local cinemas remained popular due to their relative cheapness, convenience and informality. It should be remembered that, in spite of post war optimism, the 1940s was a period of economic hardship with on-going rationing, public spending constraints and power cuts. Cinema was once again a welcome distraction, and one that required no special effort on the part of viewers. As one cinema-goer commented in a survey of young people published in 1941, ‘because of the darkness, it is possible to go to the cinema after “slipping on your coat”’.<sup>35</sup> Miskell has written, ‘the fact that cinema entertainment could be enjoyed at such little expense and without formality was clearly a significant feature of its appeal’.<sup>36</sup> However, ‘cheap and cheerful’ did not translate into profits for many cinema owners. In 1951, the average price of a cinema ticket when adjusted for inflation was 25% lower than in 1934 (in spite of higher entertainment tax). Miskell’s analysis of the

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<sup>33</sup> Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*, p. 18.

<sup>34</sup> Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*, p. 28.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*, p. 90.

<sup>36</sup> Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*, p. 52.

accounts for a cinema in Porth found that cinema-goers there paid on average 30% less for their tickets than the average British film goer during the mid 1940s.<sup>37</sup> The economic pressures experienced by cinema owners, described in detail in Chapter Seven, continued undiminished.

Whilst cinema proprietors were prevented from raising their admission fees due to ever increasing levels of competition from other leisure forms, costs continued to rise. In the late 1940s entertainment tax reached an all-time high of 36% of admission revenue,<sup>38</sup> and the trade body, the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association (CEA), continued to lobby against the 'unreasonable and unfair tax,' arguing that:-

*You can go to a theatre and see a play presented, but if the same play with the same artistes is put on the screen up goes the tax and on a seat costing 2s 6d at a cinema an entertainment tax of 1s 1d is payable where as at a theatre the same seat would be taxed by only 3d. Football clubs etc are not taxed, Why should cinemas be so burdened? The tax is crippling the whole industry and should be abolished.*<sup>39</sup>

Following the introduction of the Cinematograph Films Act 1938, quotas for the showing of British-made films continued to rise, to such an extent that for the year ending September 1950, the quota was 40% for the first feature film and 25% for supporting programmes, except for those few cinemas that were able to secure exemption. The CEA's verdict was that 'the exhibitor certainly gets it both ways. If he does show the films his patrons, like his pay-box, suffers and also his prestige. On the other hand, if he does not show his full quota of British films and has not been able to obtain the Board of Trade certificate of relief he is prosecuted by the Board of Trade and fined heavily'.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, most pre-World War One venues, which dominated provision in the south Wales valleys, were finding it difficult to meet the repair and safety requirements of regulatory authorities. As described in Chapter Seven, most licensing authorities inspected premises in advance of licenses coming up for renewal and licenses were only renewed on condition that specified works had been satisfactorily

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<sup>37</sup> Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*, pp. 23.

<sup>38</sup> Miskell, *Pulpits, Coal Pits and Fleapits*, pp. 22,23,90.

<sup>39</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Year Book, 1950.

<sup>40</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Year Book, 1950.

carried out. During the 1940s and 1950s these conditions, especially in relation to fire safety, became ever more stringent. Whilst Glamorganshire County Council had delegated its cinematograph licensing powers to its constituent districts, the county Fire Protection Officer was responsible for carrying out fire inspections prior to license renewals. In 1948, Gelligaer UDC agreed that where repairs or alterations to a cinema had been recommended by the Fire Protection Officer, only a six-month licence would be issued in the first instance, and that 'if in that time there is no tangible proof of their intention to comply with the conditions of the issue, no further licenses will be issued until conditions are complied with'.<sup>41</sup> A number of venues complained about the disruption to business and the expense involved. For example, in June 1951, Gelligaer UDC received a delegation from Bedlinog Workmen's Hall to request that the council reconsider the license conditions given the 'amount of work and money already expended on the institute'.<sup>42</sup> Following a meeting at the hall between the council clerk, two councillors, the county Fire Protection Officer and two of the hall's trustees, a compromise was reached. The fire officer would design a suitable seating plan so that the hall could comply with legal requirements, and the trustees undertook to remedy a number of minor defects.<sup>43</sup>

Home Office circulars frequently introduced new requirements, causing the trade body the CEA to comment that 'it is impossible to foresee what further conditions may be put upon licenses'.<sup>44</sup> For example, in December 1947 new conditions relating to the safety of auditoria ceilings were introduced following a catastrophic ceiling collapse. Cinematograph licensees were required to report to the licensing authority when they proposed to redecorate or erect scaffolding in the auditorium, and to use the opportunity to have the ceiling inspected by an expert on behalf of the licensee and a technical officer representing the licensing authority. If the licensee was not proposing to redecorate within five years of the last inspection, a special inspection had to be carried out. When Gelligaer UDC received the Home Office circular they resolved to include a condition in all future licenses that certificates regarding ceiling safety should be submitted to the council on a quarterly

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<sup>41</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/1/C/43.

<sup>42</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/1/C/47.

<sup>43</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/1/C/47.

<sup>44</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1950.

basis.<sup>45</sup> Although such an onerous condition is unlikely to have been implemented, it illustrates the vulnerability of cinema owners to the vagaries of regulatory decision-making, especially since there was no right of appeal against a refusal to issue a license.

As the years progressed, the bureaucracy involved with the regulatory system became ever more complex. Following receipt in April 1951 of a Glamorganshire County Council report that judged Gelligaer UDC's application of the statutory requirements in relation to cinemas/theatres as 'poor', the council (having first taken issue with the county council's assessment of its performance) decided to extend the duties of their Shops Act Inspector to include periodic inspections of the district's cinemas/theatres so that minor defects could be remedied in advance of the annual inspection by the Fire Protection Officer.<sup>46</sup> Whilst more frequent inspections could potentially lead to the early detection and resolution of problems, the dual system of district and county inspections undoubtedly amplified the regulatory burden. After just one year, in April 1952, the Shops Act Inspector resigned from his position due to ill-health and the cinema inspection responsibilities were reassigned to a clerk whose other duties related to civil defense.<sup>47</sup> In August 1953 the multi-tasking 'Civil Defence Clerk and Shops and Cinema Inspector' had also handed in his notice and the council deferred re-appointment for two years until 1955.<sup>48</sup>

In 1958, the council decided that in addition to the annual fire inspection, there would be a general inspection of all cinemas to be undertaken by three councillors (the chairs of the Council, the Public Health Committee and the General Purposes and Establishment Committee) and seven officers (the Fire Prevention Officer, Superintendent of Police, Council Clerk, Chief Medical Officer, Chief Surveyor, Public Health Inspector and Cinema Inspector).<sup>49</sup>

The regulatory quagmire meant that many cinemas fell foul of the authorities. For example, of the 43 cinemas granted licenses by Monmouthshire County Council

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<sup>45</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/1/C/43.

<sup>46</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/1/C/46.

<sup>47</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/1/C/48.

<sup>48</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/1/C/49.

<sup>49</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/1/C/54.

(which had not devolved its licensing powers to district councils) during 1948, 58% were only issued with six-month licenses due to the need for repairs and electrical safety checks.<sup>50</sup> However, due to post-war shortages of supplies for repairs, the council did relent and extended the licenses of most cinemas, although a number of licenses were revoked because of the very poor condition of premises. The Withers brothers were also involved in regulatory wrangles. In November 1949, Monmouthshire County Council received a complaint from Abertillery Trades and Labour Party regarding the condition of the Abertillery cinemas owned by the Withers brothers. As a consequence, the County Architect carried out an inspection and reported to the Council that although two cinemas required some repair work and three had deficient fire extinguishers, the cinemas were reasonably clean and met regulatory standards. The accompanying complaint of rowdyism was a matter for the police not the council.

Cinema owners struggled to meet increasingly stringent regulatory requirements in buildings that in many cases had been hurriedly fitted out as cinemas over thirty years previously. Where funding was available, the most cost-effective option was often to demolish an out-of-date building and replace it with a new state-of-the-arts venue. This was the option pursued by the Withers in relation to the New Royal cinema at Pontypool which had multiple problems including ‘insanitary lavatory accommodation’ and an ‘unsatisfactory projection suite’. In 1951, the Withers were threatened with closure if repairs were not undertaken or the cinema closed pending the Withers’ plans to build a new cinema on the same site.<sup>51</sup> Many working men’s institute cinemas were also in poor condition. A survey of thirty cinemas carried out by the Miners Welfare and Workmen’s Halls Cinema Association in 1946 found that over two thirds were in need of new seating and repairs.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Analysis of Monmouthshire County Council licensing records carried out by Phil Wakely, author of an unpublished paper *Spellbound in Darkness: The Cinema in Monmouthshire 1895 – 2015* (2015).

<sup>51</sup> Phil Wakely, *Spellbound in Darkness: The Cinema in Monmouthshire 1895 – 2015*, unpublished paper (2015).

<sup>52</sup> Quoted by Stefan Moitra in “‘The Management Committee intend to act as ushers:’ cinema operation and the South Wales Miners’ Institutes in the 1950s and 1960s’ in Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby and Philippe Meers (eds.), *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: New perspectives on European cinema history* (London and New York, 2012).

Many cinemas that had survived the financial difficulties of the inter-war years found that the years following the Second World War provided little relief in spite of increased attendance levels. Many cinema owners went bankrupt, sold their business or switched to bingo. As the CEA wrote, although ‘the exhibitor has plenty of energy and determination, he is continually being penalized and new conditions and restrictions are being forced on him... The independent exhibitor, at any rate, will have a very difficult time in carrying out his business. Determination is all very well, but alone this is not enough to guarantee survival.’<sup>53</sup> Working men’s institute cinemas similarly experienced financial difficulties in the late 1950s and 1960s, in spite of their exemption from paying entertainment tax. Moitra writes how the local audience base was weakened by the creeping closure of collieries, the increased mobility of workers and changing leisure habits. Some institutes transferred to bingo and other gaming activities, but were unable to compete with the full-time and larger bingo operators that offered higher stake money.<sup>54</sup> The closure and scaling back of cinema operations, which had cross-subsidised many other Institute activities, had major financial implications for institutes.

The experience of the Withers again serves to illustrate wider trends in the industry as well as telling an important local story. During this period of financial turbulence, the Withers once more seized the opportunity to expand their business. During the early 1940s they acquired at least fourteen cinemas in south Wales, including cinemas at Pontypridd, Newbridge, Rhymney, Pontypool, Pontnewydd, New Tredegar, Tredegar and Abersychan. Alfred’s son, Alan (who by this time was qualified as a solicitor and was working from Jackson-Withers’ base in Cardiff) spearheaded many acquisitions, whilst Julian Hodge (who by the early 1940s had established an office at 31 Windsor Road, Cardiff) was also heavily involved in business development. The Rhymney and New Tredegar cinemas were managed by F.A. Cam (Alfred Withers’ son-in-law) out of the New Hall, Bargoed,<sup>55</sup> the five Pontypridd cinemas were managed by Jackson-Withers from his Cardiff base, and the

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<sup>53</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors’ Association Year Book, 1950

<sup>54</sup> Stefan Moitra “‘The Management Committee intend to act as ushers.’” cinema operation and the South Wales Miners’ Institutes in the 1950s and 1960s’ in Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby and Philippe Meers (eds.), *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: New perspectives on European cinema history* (London and New York, 2012).

<sup>55</sup> By 1934 the Cams were living in Cardiff and in 1941 Cam was chairman of the South Wales branch of the CEA.

Pontypool, Newbridge, Pontnewydd and Abersychan cinemas were managed out of the Withers' well established Abertillery base. Thus, the pattern of having a base from which several local cinemas were managed was again replicated. In the early 1940s the Withers also acquired a cinema circuit in Cornwall comprising nine cinemas located at Newquay, Penzance, Truro, Camborne and Redruth. By the late 1940s, which coincided with peak cinema attendance figures, the Withers' business was at the height of its powers. It comprised some fifty or so cinemas in south Wales and the south west, the Withers brothers were actively involved in the day to day running of the business, and Jackson-Withers had a high industry-wide profile (for example, he was involved with the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association until the late 1940s and was chairman of its south Wales and Monmouthshire branch in 1946).

However, by the mid 1950s the Withers' relationship with the cinema business had become much more distant. By this time, Alfred Withers was around 80 years old and Albert Jackson-Withers in his mid seventies. Alfred's wife Mary Ann Withers had died in 1948, Alfred was in poor health, and his son Alan and his wife had moved in with him at Oaklands Hall, Bargoed. Although it has not been possible to trace the whole ownership trail for the Withers' cinemas, it does seem that by around the mid 1950s they had become part of Gwent and West of England Enterprises, a Julian Hodge controlled company. Julian Hodge's biographer writes that this umbrella company was intended to become a corporate home for nine quoted companies with widely varying business interests including cinemas, department stores, caravans, engineering, transport and, most important of all, banking. The philosophy behind the structure was that the strongest would help the weakest to profitability. Gwent and West and England Enterprises was the beginning of a company pyramid for which Hodge was later to be severely criticized, although he was fond of observing, 'there is nothing wrong with a pyramid, as the Egyptians would be the first to admit'.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Timothy O'Sullivan, *Julian Hodge: A Biography* (London, Boston and Henley, 1981), p. 60.



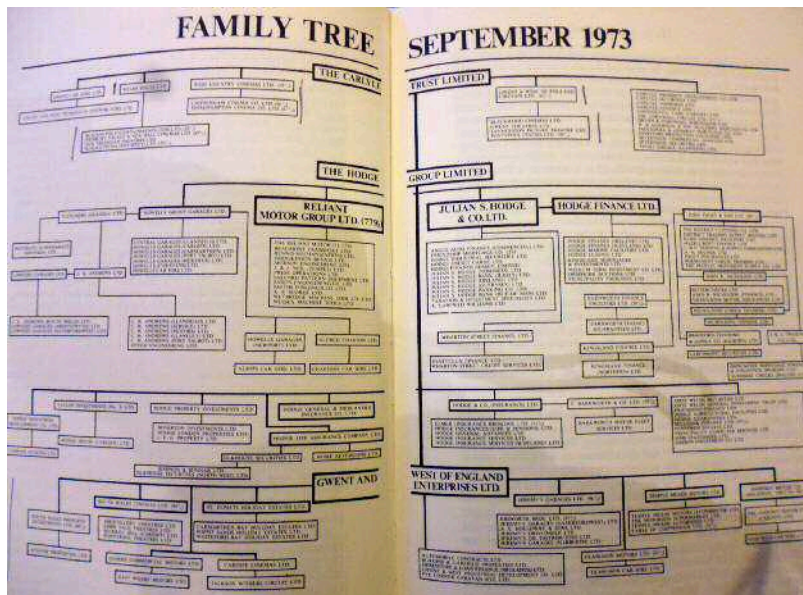


Figure 22 Hodge's corporate family tree (1973)  
 (Source: Timothy O'Sullivan, *Julian Hodge: A Biography*)

Hodge named one of the cinema circuits belonging to Gwent and West of England Enterprises the Jackson-Withers Circuit in recognition of Albert's contribution to the business and the 'immense sentimental value' the cinema business held for him.<sup>57</sup> Hodge had helped his father to run the Raglan Kinema at Hengoed before World War One and, as described previously, had strong personal as well as business connections to the Withers, in particular Jackson-Withers. However, many of the cinemas that became part of Hodge's business empire were suitable for commercial property development and sentimentality did not hamper the application of sharp business acumen. In 1961, Hodge publicly floated Gwent and West of England Enterprises raising £4.5m, and in 1963 he formed the Hodge Group of which he owned 70%. By 1973, all Hodge companies were held by Carlyle Trust Ltd. Figure 22, included in Julian Hodge's biography, illustrates the complexity of this corporate structure that included eight umbrella cinema companies including the Jackson-Withers Circuit. During the 1960s cinemas across the UK were struggling to survive in increasingly difficult market conditions, and by 1970 Hodge had disposed of around a third of the company's cinemas and converted many others to bingo halls. In 1973 he disposed of the remaining cinemas and bingo halls, selling them for £2m to

<sup>57</sup> Timothy O'Sullivan, *Julian Hodge: A Biography* (London, Boston and Henley, 1981), p. 64.

the Rank Organisation. Figure 23 is a cartoon that appeared in the *South Wales Echo* at the time.



Figure 23 Cartoon that appeared in the press at the time of the sale to Rank (Source: Reproduced in Timothy O’Sullivan, *Julian Hodge: A Biography*, 1981)

### **Private entreaty to public plebiscite – the evolving nature of community engagement**

The strong associational connections that characterized the early twentieth century when many south Wales valleys towns, including Bargoed, were young and full of civic ambition, continued to fragment in the years following the Second World War. In their study of how leading local associations, including trade unions, chapels, political parties and voluntary organisations, influenced social affairs in the early 1950s, Brennan, Cooney and Pollins found that the inter-locking connections between associations were still strong and that it was entirely legitimate to describe them as

forming a 'local system of association'.<sup>58</sup> For example, there was considerable overlap of membership, especially between chapels, trade unions and the Labour Party, and there was a 'generally accepted set of attitudes on social affairs'.<sup>59</sup> They argue that the system was characterized by i) the high status accorded to public service ii) the importance of personality over formal organisational discipline iii) the comparative unimportance of class iv) the primarily protective functions of the system and v) a humane attitude to social affairs.<sup>60</sup> However, in spite of this well developed associational machinery, the authors conclude that by the early 1950s the system was already under considerable strain. A new generation of Labour leaders, with close trade union ties, was replacing the older cohort of 'chapel socialists', and associational interests were becoming increasingly fragmented. Also, the sweeping socio-economic changes impinging on valleys towns had reduced the capacity of individuals to shape the life of their communities. John Sewell, who conducted research in the Dowlais valley between 1967 and 1969, also writes of the destruction of the structures, such as National Union of Miners' lodges, that produced local leaders. Increased occupational mobility and industrial diversification brought about by colliery closures had 'weakened the link between status in the place of work and status in the locality' and although some miners' leaders attempted to extend the base of their authority, Sewell predicted that with increased social and industrial fragmentation 'the local interest may be as difficult to define as the national interest'.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Brennan, Cooney and Pollins, *Social Change in South-West Wales*, p.92.

<sup>59</sup> Brennan, Cooney and Pollins, *Social Change in South-West Wales*, P.98.

<sup>60</sup> Brennan, Cooney and Pollins, *Social Change in South-West Wales*, pp.106-108.

<sup>61</sup> John Sewell, Colliery Closure and Social Change: A Study of a South Wales Mining Valley, *Social Science Monographs*, Number 1 (Cardiff, 1975), p.81.



Figure 24 Advertisement for the Carlton, one of the Withers' cinemas in Swansea  
(Source: South Wales Evening Post, July 22<sup>nd</sup> 1950)

The slackening of personal relationships between cinema proprietors and civic leaders that had commenced during the inter-war period, continued post 1940. Public service continued to be an important aspect of cinematography until well into the 1950s, but the strong personal connection between cinema and cinema owner had weakened. For example, during the Second World War cinemas played a crucially important role in war communications. In 1945, the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association (CEA) concluded that the 'very conspicuous attitude of condescension in official quarters towards the function of the screen, rather like the assessing of literature on the strength of an acquaintance limited to novelettes' had been replaced by an appreciation of the 'enormous power exercised by a form of entertainment able

to present not only the factual picture of what is happening all around us, but its real significance and implication'.<sup>62</sup> Whilst the trade body is clearly in the business of trumpeting the public amenity aspects of the industry's role, there can be little doubt that during the Second World War the Government became much more adept at using the medium for propaganda purposes,<sup>63</sup> to such an extent that the CEA's promotion of its war-time contribution was almost always accompanied by complaints of the burden being placed on the industry at a time of 'ever increasing overheads'.<sup>64</sup> What is striking about the contribution made by cinemas during the Second World War (compared with World War One) is that it was the trade body, rather than individual cinema owners, that most vociferously promoted their contribution.

Similarly, whilst the issue of the Sunday opening of cinemas continued to be discussed in council chambers and chapel gatherings, cinema owners were only rarely at the forefront of these debates. Rather, it was pressure from the public and the lobbying efforts of a new generation of Labour politicians that spearheaded change. In 1950 Swansea council was one of the first councils in Wales to vote for Sunday opening.<sup>65</sup> By this time, the Withers owned three cinemas in Swansea (the Albert Hall, Carlton and Picturehouse – Figure 24 is an advertisement for the Carlton dating from July 1950) but the publicly staged clash over Sunday opening principally involved Swansea City Council and chapel leaders. The latter were vehement in their opposition and as a consequence disaffected many members of the public who were increasingly distancing themselves from what they perceived as stifling chapel traditions. In September 1950, a resolution to hold a public vote on the Sunday opening issue, moved by the leader of the Labour party on Swansea council, was adopted by 35 votes to eight following 'much recrimination'.<sup>66</sup> Nonconformist chapels united behind the Swansea Christ and Life Committee that was agreed would

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<sup>62</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1945.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939-45* (London, 1997).

<sup>64</sup> Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association Year Book, 1941.

<sup>65</sup> Porthcawl, Barry and Brecon councils pre-dated Swansea's vote in favour of Sunday opening, but the circumstances surrounding these votes were quite specific. Sunday opening had been commonplace in Brecon because of the large army presence there and the need to provide entertainment on the only day that troops were not working. Porthcawl and Barry councils were generally supportive of the provision of amusement facilities because of the importance of tourism to the towns.

<sup>66</sup> *South Wales Evening Post*, 21<sup>st</sup> September 1950.

take the lead on the issue.<sup>67</sup> The cause generated an unprecedented amount of collaboration between Nonconformist denominations that had a well-established reputation for stubborn independence. A public meeting held at the Brangwyn Hall on October 19<sup>th</sup> 1950 was inundated with chapel-goers who began queuing for entrance two to three hours in advance of the meeting starting at 7pm. Although around 1,500 people gained entrance to the hall, many more were excluded, a ragged queue stretching the length of several streets. Figure 25 is a photograph of the crowds that failed to gain entry. Following the announcement that the vote within the hall had come out strongly against Sunday opening (1,411 votes to 89), ‘a small voice started to sing, the volume swelling instantly’ as the crowd inside the hall sang *Onward Christian Soldiers* and *Calon Lan*, ‘a sure indication to the people outside of what had occurred’.<sup>68</sup>



Figure 25 Crowds unable to gain entry to the public meeting  
(Source: *South Wales Evening Post*, 20th October 1950.)

However, the ‘mob’ attendance of Nonconformists elicited considerable local criticism. In a letter to the local newspaper, ‘Fair Play of Swansea’ said that ‘unfortunately I, like many thousands of others, had a job of work to do on the day of the meeting and, although I made my way to the Civic Centre at 6pm hoping to get a good seat, I found myself locked out’. He concluded by expressing the hope that the ‘will of the minority, who were fortunate in having the time to queue most of the

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<sup>67</sup> *South Wales Evening Post*, 23rd September 1950.

<sup>68</sup> *South Wales Evening Post*, 20th October 1950.

afternoon, and who can, if they so desire, also attend weekday cinema matinees will not be considered representative of the large and less fortunate majority of rate-payers in the borough'.<sup>69</sup> Several letter writers questioned the 'participation by outsiders in the affairs of the town', pointing out that many of those who had gained entrance to the hall had been bussed in by chapels located in surrounding towns. One reader said she had been 'amazed by the very high proportion of very old ladies who were present' and estimated that three-quarters of the people inside the hall were women and over half were over seventy years of age', a telling indication of chapel demography at this time. Indeed, 'one old lady being assisted down the steps must surely have been nearer a hundred'.<sup>70</sup> However, in spite of the outcome of the vote at Brangwyn Hall, the statutory process for deciding on Sunday opening allowed for a vote of *all* local electors on condition that the council received a petition of at least one hundred signatories within seven days of the public meeting. This was duly submitted and, from articles and letters appearing in the local press, there appears to have been support for the whole electorate being given a say, especially given the 'mockery of democracy' that had occurred at Brangwyn Hall.<sup>71</sup>

The poll, held on November 7<sup>th</sup>, saw a 56% turnout and yielded 33,353 votes in favour of Sunday opening and 30,445 against, a majority of 2,908. Nonconformist chapels were quick to undermine the integrity of the vote. The secretary of the Christ and Life Committee said that the majority in favour had been small and that had the electors been less apathetic further desecration of the Sabbath would have been avoided.<sup>72</sup> The Lord's Day Observance Society in Wales was even more intemperate in its comments, with one member claiming that 'the people of Swansea have this week delivered a more serious blow to the moral and spiritual life of the town than the worst of Hitler's bombs could achieve'.<sup>73</sup> Morgan argues that 'such a disproportionate, though sadly characteristic, response showed how the gap between the older, more pietistic, attitudes and present realities were widening'.<sup>74</sup> The request by the Swansea Christ and Life Society for councillors to vote with their conscience and set aside the public vote further estranged local people. The Society argued that

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<sup>69</sup> *South Wales Evening Post*, 24th October 1950.

<sup>70</sup> *South Wales Evening Post*, 25th October 1950.

<sup>71</sup> *South Wales Evening Post*, 25<sup>th</sup> October 1950.

<sup>72</sup> *South Wales Evening Post*, 8<sup>th</sup> November 1950.

<sup>73</sup> *South Wales Evening Post*, 10<sup>th</sup> November 1950.

<sup>74</sup> Morgan, *The Span of the Cross*, p. 209.

‘in spite of the narrow majority gained by a section of the people who voted in the plebiscite, it does not represent the mind of the vast majority of the people of Swansea’ and they urged the council to ‘consider very earnestly the serious and far reaching consequences which would result from the setting aside of the vital principles that are part of the traditional observance of Sunday’.<sup>75</sup> In spite of intense lobbying, the council voted 32 votes to 15 (on a non-party basis) to go ahead and apply for an order to facilitate Sunday opening, the local newspaper commenting that ‘a clear cut public poll was taken on a plain issue, cutting across orthodox party lines, and if it were to be disregarded it is flouting the whole system of referring matters for public decision and making it farcical as well as costly’.<sup>76</sup>

Public demand and the support of Labour party councilors were also crucial factors behind Gelligaer UDC’s change of heart on Sunday opening, although it was not until 1958 that cinemas in the district finally opened their doors on Sundays. The council’s refusal to allow a public vote on the issue meant that they were able to persist with their blanket refusal of applications for Sunday opening and even war time conditions did not shake their position. For example, when the joint secretary of the Bargoed and District Spitfire Fund asked for permission to show a film at the New Hall on a Sunday night in 1941 in aid of the fund he was told that the council has no power to grant permission.<sup>77</sup> In 1943, the council refused the Ministry of Information permission to show educational films on a Sunday at the Palace cinema, Bargoed even though the Ministry had shown ‘a considerable number of these shows at the industrial centres in Glamorganshire and Monmouthshire’.<sup>78</sup> In sharp contrast the council had been amenable to Sunday opening during World War One, as described in Chapter Six.

Although the Sunday opening ban remained in place for over twenty years, there were several attempts to overthrow it. The first motion ‘that Gelligaer UDC make application to the Secretary of State for an order extending the provisions of Section 1 of the Sunday Entertainments Act 1932 to the council’ was put before the council by a Labour councilor in September 1942. A deputation of church and chapel

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<sup>75</sup> *South Wales Evening Post*, 15<sup>th</sup> November 1950.

<sup>76</sup> *South Wales Evening Post*, 16<sup>h</sup> November 1950.

<sup>77</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/36.

<sup>78</sup> *Bargoed Journal*, Xth 1943.



representatives attended the meeting and following discussion the motion was defeated by a sizeable majority, 14 votes to five with two abstentions. The council also refused to support Whitefield UDC, when it wrote to them in 1943 regarding the ‘underhand activities’ of the Lords Observance Society and asking the council to approach their MP on the matter.

When Bargoed Young Conservatives wrote to the Council in January 1948 ‘relative to the provision of Sunday concerts and Sunday opening of cinemas’ after a ‘long discussion’ it was resolved that the young conservatives should be informed that ‘the council is not confident there is sufficient demand for Sunday opening to justify a public ballot’.<sup>79</sup> The next attempt to introduce Sunday opening occurred in 1950 when a petition from some 390 residents of the district was submitted to the council requesting the council ‘to organise a plebiscite throughout the area with a view to obtaining necessary approval to the opening of cinemas on Sundays’. The council deferred any decision until the clerk had time to prepare a report on Sunday opening. The issue was finally considered at a meeting in November 1950 which received deputations from the newly created Campaign for Sunday Opening and three Ministers representing the various churches and chapels in the area. Following presentations from each deputation, the council votes *not* to submit a draft order for Sunday opening, twelve votes to nine.

Following Swansea’s vote in favour of Sunday opening in November 1950, several other south Wales districts followed suite (for example, Cardiff in 1952 and Merthyr Tydfil in 1956) but Gelligaer UDC remained resistant to public pressure. When another motion to submit an order for Sunday opening was defeated in January 1956, twelve votes to ten, another public petition was submitted to the council and the directors of South Wales cinemas (formerly a Withers company and by now part of Hodge’s company, Gwent and West of England Enterprises) wrote to the council to say they had received numerous requests for Sunday opening and to request a hearing with council members. The council voted *not* to receive a deputation from the company and to adhere to their decision of January 1956. Following further requests for deputations from cinema owners and religious bodies, the council did eventually

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<sup>79</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/43.

agree to hear opposing arguments in September 1956. Messrs Donald Walters and Taylor representing the Palace, New Hall and Hanbury cinemas asked the council to 'avail themselves of the powers conferred upon them by Sunday Entertainments Act 1932 and so allow the electorate to decide on the issue of Sunday opening in the district'. By so doing the council would not necessarily be committing themselves to the principles involved, an argument used by the proponents of Sunday opening in Swansea. The Reverend Edward Lewis, vicar of Bargoed, and several members of Bargoed and Hengoed Free Church Council urged the councillors to make up their own mind on the issue, and to take no steps towards Sunday opening of cinemas. By a majority of one the council decided to adhere to its previous decision *not* to go to a public vote.

This slight majority was eventually eliminated by the dramatic destruction by fire of the New Hall Theatre, Bargoed, in January 1958 (Figure 26 shows the theatre ablaze). In February 1958 the Jackson-Withers Circuit (part of Gwent and West of England Enterprises) wrote to the council making an application for 'the Palace cinema to be opened on Sundays particularly as it was difficult to cater for all their cinema patrons during six days since the temporary closure of the Hanbury Cinema and the destruction by fire of the New Hall cinema'.<sup>80</sup> In a dramatic U turn in March 1958, over thirty years since the Sunday ban was introduced and fifty years since the New Hall first opened its doors, the council resolved by thirteen votes to twelve, and on the casting vote of the chairman, to submit a draft order for Sunday opening. A poll of voters, held on 29<sup>th</sup> May 1958, delivered a majority in favour of opening and in August of that year cinemas in the district once again opened on Sundays.

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<sup>80</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/53.



Figure 26 The New Hall Theatre ablaze  
(Source: courtesy of Roy Smith, Gelligaer Historical Society)

## Conclusion

However tumultuous the socio-economic and cultural changes experienced during the thirty or so years following the Second World War, they did not create new trajectories for the cinema industry so much as reinforce those that had already been established during the inter-war years. Many cinemas went out of business and those that survived the competitive buffeting of a greatly expanded and specialist leisure market were concentrated into ever fewer hands. Some ‘old hands’ survived – for example, Dooner, Willis and Will Stone, all south Wales showmen who had run theatres since the early 1900s, were still operating cinemas in the 1950s.<sup>81</sup> However, most small operators were unable to make a living in increasingly difficult market conditions. The Withers’ success depended on eliminating damaging competition by creating local cinema monopolies and using their corporate weight to drive down costs. Their (at least partial) withdrawal from the business in the 1950s was fortuitous. The 1960s saw a dramatic fall-off in demand for cinema, although Julian Hodge, who had absorbed the cinemas into his much larger corporate empire, was able to squeeze maximize value from the assets when he eventually sold-up in the early 1970s.

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<sup>81</sup> Their cinema circuits are listed in Cinematograph Exhibitors’ Association year books until the 1950s.

The years following the Second World War also saw a continuance of the trend for cinema-related interests to become ever more pluralist and complex. During cinema's formative years, battle lines were largely drawn on religious and commercial grounds. Although there continued to be considerable opposition to Sunday opening amongst Nonconformists, by the 1940s the arguments were being pitched rather differently. As Morgan has written, with the weakening of the 'Nonconformity consensus, the imposition of its puritan mores became highly problematic and contentious'.<sup>82</sup> Nonconformists were increasingly appealing to national loyalty, the importance of observing the Sabbath that for generations had been a defining feature of what it was to be Welsh. For example, when Nonconformists met in Swansea to discuss Sunday opening, a pivotal argument was that the town was 'still very much Welsh in sentiment and tradition' and Sunday opening would lead not only to 'spiritual decline' but also the erosion of important Welsh conventions.<sup>83</sup> Whilst Nonconformist resistance continued, albeit on readjusted grounds, many cinema owners retreated from the frontline. Lobbying for Sunday opening exposed them to the criticism of chasing profit, and the close connections with local civic leaders that had previously eased the assimilation of cinema had largely been severed due to the increased complexity of local government, changes in local leadership, and the geographical spread of cinema circuits. For practical and tactical reasons, most cinema owners took a back seat on the Sunday opening issue, letting the public and supportive local councillors take the lead. The depersonalisation of relationships with civic leaders is suggested by the fact that by the 1940s cinema owners only rarely appeared before the regulatory authorities electing instead to send their solicitors.

During the years following the Second World War positions on Sunday opening were far from fixed or immutable, indeed contradictory perspectives frequently coexisted in the same 'camp'. A small number of cinema owners opposed Sunday opening. For example, Arthur Andrews who co-owned cinemas in Cardiff, Porth and Caerphilly and had been 'outspoken in his views that the opening of cinemas and public houses in Swansea would be totally against the traditions of the Welsh people', sent a cheque for £25 to the fund organised by Swansea churches to

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<sup>82</sup> Morgan, *The Span of the Cross*, p. 209.

<sup>83</sup> *South Wales Evening Post*, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1950.

oppose Sunday opening.<sup>84</sup> Whilst councils that resisted the Sunday opening of cinemas often sanctioned other Sunday activities, even the opening of public houses. For example, in December 1957 Gelligaer UDC resolved twelve votes to nine to support the campaign for opening public houses on Sunday, although cinemas remained closed until 1958.<sup>85</sup> This fragmentation of positions on Sunday opening very much reflects the growing complexity of economic, social and cultural worlds during the period covered by this chapter.

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<sup>84</sup> *South Wales Evening Post*, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1950.

<sup>85</sup> Gelligaer UDC minutes, Glamorgan Archives, reference UDG/C/1/53.

## Conclusion

The Withers' story has some unexpected endings. In spite of Alfred Withers' initial antipathy towards Bargoed, he continued to live in the town until his death in 1962 at the age of 87. Furthermore, his son Alan and daughter-in-law Evelyn followed suite, working as solicitors in the town until they retired, and continuing to live at Oaklands Hall until growing frailty made it necessary for them to move to more manageable accommodation.<sup>1</sup> In spite of the cinema business' longevity, neither brother seems to have made a fortune from their involvement. When Albert Jackson-Withers died in a nursing home in Surrey in 1965, close to the home of one of his two daughters, his estate had a gross value of around £24,000 but a net value of zero.<sup>2</sup> However, Jackson-Withers' love of performance and disdain for administration had endured. For many years, Julian Hodge had advised him to settle some complicated accounts with the Inland Revenue to be told 'I'm leaving all that bother to my bloody executors.'<sup>3</sup> In the event, Hodge was the sole executor of Jackson-Withers' will.

Each of the once vibrant cinemas in Bargoed had poignant fates, symptomatic of the wider economic decline of the south Wales valleys. A Woolworths store was built on the site of the fire-damaged New Hall Theatre, although this subsequently closed and was replaced with a pound shop. The Palace cinema spent a number of years as a bingo hall in the 1960s before being opened once again as a cinema, the Cameo, in 1973. Its second life as a cinema lasted some ten years or so and thereafter it lay semi-derelict (Figure 27) until being demolished in 1994 and replaced with a Job Centre. The Hanbury cinema also had a follow-on life as a bingo hall in the 1970s, but this was short-lived and the building has remained empty for more than thirty years (Figure 28 shows the cinema in the background with a statue commemorating the town's mining history in the foreground). At the time of writing, Caerphilly County Borough's plans to build a new cinema in the town are on hold due to budgetary considerations. On a more positive note, the Maxime cinema in Blackwood, formerly owned by the Withers, was re-opened as an independent cinema in 2014.

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<sup>1</sup> Papers in possession of author.

<sup>2</sup> Probate search findings.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy O'Sullivan, *Julian Hodge: A Biography* (London, Boston and Henley, 1981).



Figure 27 A solitary griffin on the derelict Palace cinema  
(Source: Courtesy of Phillip Wakely)



Figure 28 The long abandoned Hanbury cinema in the background  
(Source: Author's own photograph)

The study's focus on Bargoed and the Withers brothers goes beyond illustrative purposes. The level of magnification provided by this sort of micro-history allows us to explore how broad historiographical themes play out within specific community settings, and the long time frame of the study (some sixty years) provides some perspective in terms of broader socio-economic, cultural and technological changes. The study's combination of methodologies permits us to shine a light on some previously dark corners of cinema and Welsh historiography. For example, the study confounds many of the assumptions that are commonly made about commercialised leisure. It is clear that in the south Wales valleys, the mass market for cinema was the

result of the independent activity of hundreds of small scale entrepreneurs who responded to the opportunities presented by the widespread production and distribution of film. Also, the commercial leisure sector was a hybrid creature. From the mid nineteenth century, ‘public’ halls had been run as profit-making ventures, and working-men’s institutes carried on this tradition when they opened commercial cinema operations (sometimes leased to private companies) at the beginning of the twentieth century. What has been described as ‘other cinema’ (ie ‘non-theatrical’ exhibition<sup>4</sup>) was in fact a significant part of the commercial cinema industry in the south Wales valleys. The rapid expansion of south wales valleys towns generated an entrepreneurial energy that spilled across sectors, blurring the edges between public and private.

Neat sector demarcations are also confounded by the role played by cinema entrepreneurs in their local communities. Many cinema owners and managers were well known public figures, active in a variety of official and voluntary roles, and their contributions to local charitable causes often exceeded those of public bodies. During these early years the commercial sector in Bargoed was vibrant and optimistic, and commercial ambitions were closely aligned with those of the town. Further, it was not only the civic elite that backed local business development; the wider public was also generally supportive, many bought shares in local (including cinema) companies and there was widespread recognition that a thriving town brought cascade benefits.

However, it is important not to over-emphasise this ‘corporate democratization’ and the extent to which local communities were bound together by a shared investment culture. Over time, share and company ownership became concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, and multiple business failures during the depression of the inter-war years seriously dented confidence levels. Further, exploitative business practices brought rapid public approbation, since the civic project depended on community interests being placed (or seen to be placed) ahead of private interests.

Although cinema developed into one of the most popular forms of commercial leisure of the twentieth century, this study has found that most early entrepreneurs struggled to make a living. The scramble to enter the industry, especially in economic

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes and Richard C. Allen (eds.), *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema* (Exeter, 2007), p.9.



boom areas like the south Wales valleys, created a highly competitive and fluid market. Many ventures failed, especially those set up by opportunists with no or little experience of the entertainment business. Anticipated 'gold mines' became 'money pits' and the economic depression of the 1920s and 1930s further exacerbated market conditions. It was only by consolidating cinemas into circuits that entrepreneurs could use their corporate weight to force down overheads and eliminate damaging competition by creating local cinema monopolies.

The controversial nature of cinema makes it a useful lens through which to examine how power and influence in the south Wales valleys towns was distributed and exercised. Croll argues that whilst class was an 'ever-important ingredient in the civilizing mission' in Merthyr between 1870 and 1914, other identities and motivations related to "the town", "the public", "the citizenry" and "the people" were also important.<sup>5</sup> This study has similarly found that responses towards cinema did not align neatly with class or political affiliation, although working class people and Labour supporters were most likely to embrace the medium. Perhaps the most potent indicator of attitude was the strength of religious, in particular Nonconformist, conviction. Cinema became emblematic of the encroaching secularization of society that Nonconformists were determined to resist. During the early years covered by this study, Nonconformism was deeply embedded in south Wales valleys society and permeated the local state bodies that were responsible for implementing a new regulatory system for cinema. The implementation of these regulatory controls became the front-line between pro and anti-cinema lobby groups, although the local press was also an important arena. Much of the conflict coalesced around the issue of Sunday opening. The prevailing assumption is that a Sunday opening ban was deeply entrenched in Wales, but in reality it was a highly contentious issue. Voting on Sunday opening was often very close and local authorities ricocheted between allowing and disallowing Sunday opening.

In many ways the controversy is entirely understandable. On the one hand, cinema represented modernity and advancement which appealed to 'civic boosters', but it also held the potential to upset the settled order in which chapel and church dominated

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<sup>5</sup> Andy Croll, *Civilising the Urban; Popular culture and public space in Merthyr, c1870-1914* (Cardiff, 2000), pp. 217-218.

non-work life. This conflict was played out at the individual level – many civic leaders switched sides and each side had some unexpected supporters. For example, some cinema owners were resolute Sabbitarians, whilst some churchmen had a relaxed attitude towards Sunday recreation. It is clear that most people had a clustering of roles and identities – for example, the faithful Nonconformist, new Labourite, civic-booster, businessman – that in fluctuating combinations influenced attitudes to cinema. One week, for example, Gelligaer UDC voted in favour of the Sabbitarian cause, whilst the following week an off the cuff remark that impugned the character of Bargoedites, made by a church Minister who had lived in the town for only three months, was the catalyst for a licensing decision in favour of cinema owners. This fluidity of opinion meant that it was essential for cinema entrepreneurs to embed themselves within local communities and secure and sustain local support. As the wrangles over licensing issues demonstrate, it is clear many cinema owners, especially those with the public relations skills of Jackson-Withers, did this with some success. However, it is important to stress that it was ultimately broader forces - economic, social, cultural and technological – that had most influence on cinema’s reception and the fate of the industry as a whole.

This study suggests that an agency versus structure dichotomy is far too crude to be of analytical merit. The people of the south Wales valleys undoubtedly had agency in relation to cinema. At the individual level, people voted with their feet (there was, after all, an expanding leisure market), supported or rejected local politicians (Sunday opening was an electoral issue in many wards), wrote to the local press and petitioned regulatory authorities. Collective voices, such as the Free Church Council, working men’s institute and chamber of trade, were also vociferously expressed through a range of formal and informal, overt and covert channels. However, these daily interactions need to be placed within the context of prevailing socio-economic and cultural conditions. Cinema’s eventual transformation from cultural frontier to mainstream entertainment was due to deeper societal (structural) changes, perhaps most importantly Nonconformism losing much of its community status and influence. The formerly close relationship between chapel and council chamber loosened as local government became a more complex and professionalized business and a new generation of Labour politicians, more closely aligned to trade union than to church or chapel, came into power. Whilst Sunday opening continued to be an issue until well into the 1950s, objections became more nationalistic than religious. There were also implications for

the role of cinema entrepreneurs within local communities. The growing acceptance of cinema meant there was less need for personal lobbying, whilst the consolidation of cinemas into circuits, and the changing nature of local state governance, made it impractical to sustain such close relationships with the civic leadership.

It was also wider economic and societal forces that sped cinema's decline in the late 1960s and 1970s. The economic reverberations caused by the dismantling of the coal industry are familiar enough, but there were also major social and cultural transformations. Older cultural habits rooted in chapel, pit and place were replaced by more individualized and home-based pursuits such as radio, TV and popular journalism/literature, whilst a greater ability and willingness to travel undermined local cultural institutions. Whilst it is tempting to attribute these changes to pivotal historical movements, it is clear that transformational influences were at work over a much longer time-frame, for example the fragmentation of local associational connections, the growing secularization of society and the development of a youth culture.

An important question, raised in the introduction, is the extent to which the role played by cinema as a local institution was similar in other locations. There is reason to believe that Bargoed was not so very different in its responses to cinema from other south Wales valleys towns, and even provincial cities elsewhere in the UK, continental Europe and the United States (although Bargoed's civic elite would wince at the description 'provincial'!). The complexity of responses to cinema - which included the strident opposition of Nonconformist churches, the enthusiastic responses of audiences and the eager incorporation of cinema into the civic project - was not unique to Bargoed. As we have seen, Andy Croll's charting of Merthyr's journey from the 'urban' to the 'civic' between 1870 and 1914 also found that the civic discourse was riven with conflicts which whilst reflecting class differences also incorporated other identities and motivations.<sup>6</sup>

Micro-studies of film exhibition undertaken in small town locations in other European countries and in the United States (very few have been undertaken in the UK) suggest that there are some important parallels with the situation in the south Wales

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<sup>6</sup> Andy Croll, *Civilising the Urban; Popular culture and public space in Merthyr, c1870-1914* (Cardiff, 2000), p. 218.

valleys during the early 1900s. For example, in three provincial Swedish cities during the period 1897 to 1911, ‘rather than fending off the entertainment and seeking control over its content and function, the two sectors of commercial entertainment and civil society cooperated and nurtured each other, through both economic and social measures’.<sup>7</sup> In the early days of cinema in Hungary, cinema proprietors promoted their businesses by arguing that without cinema, the ‘isolated countryside’ would be cut off from the circulation of national culture and suffer ‘cultural stagnation’. Movie theatres provided civilization and could preserve and spread Hungarian culture.<sup>8</sup> In Norfolk, Virginia the proprietors of film exhibition circuits were viewed by the press during the period 1910 to 1920 as ‘upstanding and socially involved citizens’, ‘a vital part of the middle and upper classes that brought together social respectability and movie-going’.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Allen argues that throughout the 1920s and beyond the majority of movie theatres in the United States were in small towns where the community’s only cinema was also likely to be its largest secular meeting place, functioning as a multi-purpose venue, tightly woven into not only the community’s social and cultural life but also its civic life. Exhibitors were embedded into their communities, boosting the town and its retail enterprise as members of the Chamber of Commerce and cooperating with the churches, the Women’s Club and the PTA.<sup>10</sup>

Biltereyst, Maltby and Meers write that the evidence uncovered to date suggests that small town communities in Europe and the US may well have shared similar experiences of cinema, distinct from those of city audiences.<sup>11</sup> If this is the case, the intensive interaction between cinema proprietors and local communities seen in the South Wales valleys during the early 1900s may well have been replicated in other small towns in the UK and further afield.

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<sup>7</sup> Asa Jernudd, ‘Spaces of early film exhibition in Sweden, 1897-1911’, in Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby and Philippe Meers (eds.), *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: New perspectives on European cinema history*, (London and New York, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Anna Manchin, ‘Imagining modern Hungary through film: debates on national identity, modernity and cinema in early twentieth century Hungary’, in Biltereyst, Maltby and Meers (eds.), *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity*.

<sup>9</sup> Terry Lindvall, ‘Sundays in Norfolk: Toward a Protestant Utopia Through Film Exhibition in Norfolk, Virginia, 1910-1920’, in Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes and Richard C. Allen (eds.), *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema* (Exeter, 2007)

<sup>10</sup> Robert C. Allen, ‘Reimagining the History and Experience of Cinema in a Post-Movie going age’, in Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers (eds.), *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, (Chichester, 2011)

<sup>11</sup> Biltereyst, Maltby and Meers (eds.), *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity*, p.7.

Whilst there appears to have been many shared (even universal) aspects to provincial cinema provision in its formative years, development paths are likely to have diverged in response to differential socio-economic and cultural forces operating at local, regional and national levels.<sup>12</sup> Although independent ownership persisted in the south Wales valleys, the nature of ownership and the connections that entrepreneurs had with local communities underwent significant changes. In many ways the trajectory of the Withers' business reflects the trajectory of the industry as a whole. The survival of the business increasingly depended on the legal and business acumen of Alfred Withers and Julian Hodge and less on the old fashioned showmanship of Jackson-Withers. Hardy corporate perennials had replaced the showy annuals of early years.

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<sup>12</sup> There is limited research available on the long term development of provincial cinema.

## **Annex 1**

### **Company Records<sup>13</sup>**

The main functions of Company Registers are to incorporate and dissolve companies, to examine and file documents required to be deposited by companies under the terms of the Companies Acts and to make this information available for public inspection. The files are, therefore, of great help in shedding light on a business, but their content and survival has varied greatly over the years. Files created under the 1856 Joint Stock Companies Act usually consist of the memorandum and articles of association containing details of a company's constitution, its reasons for formation and its function, an agreement with vendors if the company was formed to take over another business as a going concern, statement of nominal share capital, location of registered office, a register of directors, annual returns containing details of share capital and debentures and shareholders, and, in the case of dissolved companies, documents concerning liquidation and dissolution.

The 1856 Act removed the need for companies to submit an annual balance sheet (making it difficult to assess profitability) but 1907 legislation required that an audited statement, in the form of a balance sheet, should be annexed to the annual returns made to the registers. However, in the early years the information provided was often very nominal and often contained only a summary of the company's capital, assets and liabilities. An exception was private companies (defined for first time in 1907 legislation) who did not have to provide this information. From 1929, the balance sheet and the directors' report presented to the AGM had to be filed with the register. The Companies Act 1948 also obliged non-exempt private companies to make a return of accounts.

The main company files of companies dissolved after 1860 are located in the National Archives in class BT31 and reference is by company registration number.

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<sup>13</sup> The Annex draws heavily on John Orbell, *A Guide to Tracing the History of a Business*, Business Archives Council, (London, 1987). Although dated, company record sources remain the same today.

Liquidators' accounts are preserved separately in class BT34 for companies which were dissolved between 1890 and 1933. Liquidator's accounts of companies dissolved after 1933 are in BT31.

Files for all companies dissolved before 1907 have been kept but stripped of certain classes of documents. After 1907 files of dissolved PUBLIC companies have been kept but stripped mainly of annual accounts. In 1950 it was agreed that all annual accounts would be stripped out apart from the first, last and every intermediate fifth year (reduced to tenth year in 1960). Survival of private company files is limited as only 1% were retained until 1960. It was then decided to retain all files of non-exempt private companies but to strip them as described above (this affects companies dissolved after 1940 because of 20 year put aside rule).

## **Annex 2**

### **South Wales cinema companies included in the analysis.**

Aberaman Cinemas Ltd.  
Abercynon Palace Ltd.  
Aberdare Cinemas Co. Ltd.  
Aberfan Picture Palace Co. Ltd.  
Abertillery (1913) Electric Theatre Co. Ltd.  
Abertillery Picture Palace Ltd.  
Associated Electric Theatres Co. Ltd.  
Blackwood Electric Theatres Co. Ltd  
Blaenavon Coliseum Co. Ltd.  
Brynmawr Cinema Ltd.  
Caerphilly and District Cinema Company Ltd  
Crumlin Electric Co. Ltd  
Cwmaman Cinema Ltd.  
Ebbw Vale Cinema Ltd  
Machen Cinema Hall Ltd  
Market Hall Cinema (Ebbw Vale) Ltd.  
Merthyr Electric Theatres Co. Ltd.  
Merthyr Palace Co Ltd (1911)  
Merthyr Palace Co. Ltd (1919)  
New Tredegar Electric Theatre Ltd.  
Park Cinema (Aberdare) Ltd.  
Pengam and Fleur de Llys Cinema and Billiards Co. Ltd  
Pontypridd Cinema Co. Ltd  
Pontypridd Electric Theatre Co. Ltd  
Pontypridd Palladium Co. Ltd  
Rhymney Cinema Ltd  
Risca Palace Co. Ltd  
Wales Electric Theatres Ltd  
Welsh Cinemas Co. Ltd  
Welsh Palaces Co. Ltd  
Ystrad Rhondda Cinema Co. Ltd



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2. REPORTS, SURVEYS AND STATISTICALSOURCES
3. CONTEMPORARY JOURNALS
4. CONTEMPORARY NEWSPAPERS
5. CONTEMPORARY MEMOIRS

## **SECONDARY SOURCES**

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7. ARTICLES/PAPERS
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