

Cinema *for* All



Rather like pop-up shops, the 'community cinema' has begun springing up all over the UK. First there was the Curzon Clevedon in Northern Somerset, formed by the local community in 1996

when the existing cinema there closed;

followed by the Southwold Electric Picture Palace (1997); the Screen Machine – a touring mobile cinema owned and operated by Regional Screen Scotland – and several other projects, including the Royston Picture Palace, which opened its doors to the public last June. There is, however, no suggestion of any chronological connection with the above openings – they are merely cited as operating community cinemas.

As an architect with an interest in UK cinema developments, I began thinking: Why have community cinemas suddenly come into vogue? At one time, following WW2, there were some 4,500 cinemas in the country. One may assume that most towns – including even the smaller, rural, places – generally enjoyed a cinema of some description. However, since the 1960s and early 1970s, following technological advance along with the ascendancy of Television, many cinemas have since closed, having been succeeded by multiplexes provided principally by the Main Three – Odeon, Vue and Cineworld – as well as those run by a handful of independents – Scott Cinemas, Curzon, *et. al.* I even wondered if community cinemas were, in a sense,

Veteran cinema architect, **Bill Chew**, examines the re-emergence of 'cinemas in the community' – in which, via a combination of assorted funding programmes and determined local initiative, greater opportunities for film access in our changing Digital Age are being made possible whilst also giving Mainstream Cinema a run for its money.

helping to redress the balance in Exhibition, restoring the post-war situation. The replies from those I'd contacted were both surprising and thought-provoking. But firstly, how do we define a community cinema?.

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY CINEMA?

The British Federation of Film Societies (BFFS) defines a community cinema as 'any film exhibition taking place in the community, run by volunteers on a not-for-profit basis'. The BFFS exists to help both start-ups and existing groups in making the best of their community cinemas, advising on such issues as licensing, film-booking, equipment-procurement and so on; as well as holding training days, workshops, conferences and viewing sessions. The Sheffield-based society is run by three full-time staff and receives funding from the BFI and various trusts and foundations, as well as through membership fees and income from its film distribution scheme.

Additionally, the BFFS hosts the annual prestigious Film Society-of-the-Year (FSOY) Awards in London, a kind of

Oscars for the community cinema movement. This award – the Engholm Prize – has been won in unprecedented fashion in 2012 and 2013 by the Newcastle Community Cinema (NCC) based in Co. Down, Northern Ireland; the cinema itself being located in the beautiful Annesley Hall overlooking Dundrum Bay. The NCC began life in 2009 on the initiative of Rob Manley and friends and has since grown from strength-to-strength. It screens films monthly and aims to bring great movies – new and old, familiar and less so – to

a 50-seater college campus lounge. They have since moved to a purpose-built 117-seat tiered auditorium shared with Market Harborough Theatre in the town centre. Their recent investment in a DCI-compliant digital projector has enabled them to screen live (alternative) content of opera, *viz.* theatre and ballet, which has proven extremely successful. The Electric Picture Palace in Southwold, Suffolk, meanwhile, boasts 70 seats and a unique tiny Wurlitzer. It's

THE BFFS STORY

THE BFFS' ORIGINS date back to 1925 – known then as The Film Society – holding its first meeting at the New Gallery Kinema in London's Regent Street. Among its founder members were such luminaries as H.G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, Augustus John, Anthony Asquith and John Maynard Keynes. One of the primary objectives of the Society was to screen more *avant garde* material which wouldn't have found an outlet in a commercial cinema. Other than screenings, there were exhibitions of artwork, also lectures and discussions – all part of the cultural milieu of the Edwardian society of the time.

The transformation of the BFFS from its early history into its present form remains a somewhat torturous one, outside of the scope of this article. Fortunately for the Community Cinema movement, though, it has survived. And, in present form, the BFFS dates to around 2004. The BFI and BFFS have enjoyed a healthy symbiotic relationship over many years, one which continues to thrive to this day.



the people of Newcastle and the surrounding region. In the citation for FSOY, the BFFS said "the judges were blown-away with the level of work executed by NCC, mentioning that the cinema had done an exceptional job in delivering a top class programme of film to its local population... [and] represents the very best that a community cinema can do and achieve".

VARIETY & ABUNDANCE

Unlike their commercial counterparts, community cinemas appear in many forms. They can be operated from itinerant vehicles, bringing films to remote communities in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, for example; or as pop-ups like the Magic Lantern Film Club, based around Sheffield, and whose intriguing motto is 'Experience Cinema Anywhere'. Magic Lantern, run by artist Melanie Pearson and her colleagues on a minuscule budget, provides the local population with opportunities to see good films in local community spaces and unusual places. Octagon Films in Market Harborough, Leicestershire, started life in 2002, by Peter Mitchell and colleagues, showing films in

run by architect John Bennett, along with members of his family and others, and operates as Southwold Film Society, a registered charity. The Electric delivers three ten-week seasons a year plus a shorter summer season with more films being shown. These, then, are some examples of British community cinemas. There are undoubtedly many more with equally interesting backstories, all fulfilling the important function of bringing cinema to small towns and rural communities.

OPPORTUNITY

According to Jacqueline Chell, General Operations Manager of the BFFS, there are roughly 600 community cinemas in the UK (some 550 of which having BFFS membership), and she believes that the heyday of the community cinema is perhaps upon us, and with compelling reasons to confirm it. The first is that we live in an Internet and Social Media age and so it's even easier than ever to locate your local community cinema; and equally easy to set one up if none exists. Secondly, the advances in technology – the ready availability and affordability of DVD/Blu-ray and HD Video projection, and even DCI-compliant digital projectors and inexpensive ▶

multi-channel sound systems – have made everything that much more accessible. Thirdly, the availability of new DVD etc releases is rapidly changing, with many distributors offering titles earlier, and sometimes almost day-and-date with the theatrical release, two cases-in-point being *No* and *Gloria* from Network Releasing. Fourthly, and equally important, Commercial Cinema is becoming prohibitively expensive for many now, especially families. By contrast, community cinemas provide many people with the films they want to see in their locality, which is convenient and affordable for them.

A WIDENING CINEMATIC DIVIDE

A further noteworthy factor is that community cinemas operate more widely in rural areas where, according to the BFFS, their penetration is as high as 38%, compared to just 3% for commercial cinemas. Does this therefore confirm what was suggested earlier about community cinemas redressing Exhibition's imbalance and thus restoring the post-war *status quo*? Well, cinema consultant, Ron Inglis, disagrees, suggesting that the loss of cinemas since WW2 cannot be compared with any current renaissance in community cinemas; while adding that many film clubs exist merely for social reasons and may perhaps screen films only once a month... and so the situation is actually nothing like the cinemas which have been lost since the war. However, it is worth reflecting on the function of cinema following the war when most homes only had radio and practically no TV. Cinemas, which evolved from fairgrounds, through vaudeville and music halls, offered out-of-home entertainment. They also not only screened films but showed newsreels, such as



Pathé News, as a means of informing the public of local and world events. Today, of course, news reaches us instantly via 24-hour news channels, Twitter, and other Social Media platforms.

However, there is a further point to remember: Commercial Cinema is seemingly becoming more of a 'blockbuster outlet' – for big-budget films by celebrity actor-directors – whether in the form of stories, Fantasy, CGI/Animation, Sci-Fi or IMAX – as a way of enticing people to spend money in cinemas on tickets and concessions. Because of these huge budgets, investors absolutely need to make returns on their investments. So, perhaps by default, Cinema is becoming increasingly polarised. And, if the trend continues, and little at present

suggests otherwise, Mainstream Cinema will be affordable only to particular cross-sections of the community. For the remainder, community cinemas will become increasingly important in the provision of filmic entertainment.

COMMUNITY CINEMA & THE FUTURE

In addition to the BFFS, the BFI also plays a central role in promoting film to the community. Founded in 1933 as a charity governed by Royal Charter, its aims are to combine cultural, creative and industrial roles, bringing together the BFI

THE ORIGINS OF COMMUNITY CINEMA



THE BFI had observed that the presentation of films predates Cinema through fairground pioneers and the like. Had the term 'Community Cinema' been in vogue then, perhaps Scarborough Pier might have been an early pop-up venue hosting moving-picture shows during its concert parties from 1905. Many early film-makers were also exhibitors.

Neither is the concept of showing films in transport facilities a new one. Hale's Tours, launched in 1903 in the U.S., was very much of the fairground tradition. Films shown in a rocking railway coach sought to give the impression of taking a train-ride by presenting scenic views taken from a moving train. Train noises were added to provide verisimilitude. Film historian, Arthur Knight, in his 1957 book: *The Liveliest Art*, opined that "... these Hale's Tours became a craze... and made a fortune for their entrepreneur... but they only lasted a few years". In France, from 1897-1900, Raoul Grimoin-Sanson's 'Cineorama' experiment projected travelogues filmed from a ten-synchronised projector rig to reproduce a panoramic picture onto a 360° screen within a balloon-shaped structure.

National Archive and BFI Reuben Library, Film Distribution, Exhibition and Education at BFI Southbank and BFI IMAX, publishing and festivals. The BFI awards lottery funding for film production and distribution, also education, audience development and both market intelligence and research.

A central tenet of the Institute's *Film Forever: Plan to 2017* is Breadth, Reach and Depth. Breadth: A wider range of films offered; Reach: Greater numbers having access to those films, and Depth: More opportunities to engage with, understand and appreciate film. The BFI believes that Community Cinema in all its forms contributes measurably to each of these objectives. The focus of BFI support under 'Breadth' is to extend choice and empower communities to access films relevant to them. In 'Reach', it believes that Community Cinema offers effective ways of taking film to underserved communities where traditional cinema operations would be less than economically-viable. And, for 'Depth', it suggests that many communities, through ownership of events, will create

add-ons around a screening to enhance understanding and enjoyment (this generally works well on a peer-to-peer basis – as in a book group setting – to achieve different perspectives on the particular film's meaning; or with the assistance of a 'film educator' to lead a post-screening discussion for greater understanding).


BFI-funding is organised into different areas:

- i) **Film Audience Network** – supporting audience and sector development across the UK; training, advice and funding for Independent Exhibition, channelled via nine key film organisations in Britain
- ii) **Support for the BFFS** – directly funded by BFI to support and develop film societies and other forms of Community Cinema
- iii) **Independent Cinema Office (ICO)** – funded to deliver a range of services for BFI, including support for non-theatrical exhibition, and
- iv) **The BFI Neighbourhood Fund** – supports and extends the provision of film to UK communities which are unable to access a cinema experience due to geographic, social, or economic circumstances, by helping them to show films in their local community venue. It's intended that the Fund will help grow audiences (especially for UK and Independent film) across Britain and will have an allocation of up to £2m over the coming four years. BFI launched the first phase of 'BFI Neighbourhood' (the Pilot Fund) in November 2013.

The late Roger Manvell – first director of the British Film Academy (today's BAFTA), and author of many books on film and film-making – spoke of "the minority cinema being the pioneer cinema... [and that] ...every educated community should possess one so that the opportunity to see important films of limited box office appeal shall be open

The minority cinema (is) the pioneer cinema... every educated community should possess one so that the opportunity to see important films of limited box office appeal shall be open to all.

Roger Manvell
Former first director of the
British Film Academy (BAFTA)

to all". Another champion of Community Cinema was the late John Grierson, pioneering Scottish documentary-maker. According to Forsyth Hardy in his 1946 book *Grierson on Documentary*: "From the beginning, Grierson was aware that there is a greater seating capacity in schools and village halls, in church halls and community centres, than there is in cinema theatres, and in all his activities, this non-theatrical use of films has been to the forefront". In this particular sense, community cinemas truly are the pioneers as they have brought, and continue to bring, a varied programme of Cinema to the neighbourhoods they serve where there is a paucity of film-viewing. Some say that Community Cinema is as old as, if not older than, Commercial Exhibition itself. 

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