

The Working Life of Roger Dixon in the world of Cinemas

This document was handwritten and given to a member of Hetton History Group around 2000. It has been reproduced here because it not only details the working life of an individual, Roger Dixon, but it is impressive in the way he has recorded information about the work of a cinema projectionist during the transition from silent films through to the 1950s. The interpretation of his statement is as follows.

My first interest in the cinema began at the tender age of 5 years. We lived in a village near Sunderland called South Hylton. We lived in a large house facing up the village called "Ford Lodge". My Uncle Jim started a Picture Palace in the village hall, seating 400 patrons. My uncle ran the projectors, my mother played the piano and my aunt did the pay-box. On a Saturday night it was my privilege on the fire bucket filled with sand and watch my Uncle Jim do the projection on the single projector in those days. The projector was called a Gaumont and to drive the lighting and D.C. current there was a gas engine with a very large fly wheel and belt to a dynamo. All the village knew when the picture house was open by the 'chug, chug' of the gas engine. (*Note:- it was not unusual for some cinemas in the early days to have a steam engine, fired by coal, driving the engine to run the dynamo*).

My mother was one of the first piano players to play to the silent pictures and by the early 1920s she had played the piano at a lot of leading cinemas in both the north-east and Scotland. My mother is buried in Hetton cemetery and on her tombstone is a group of musical notes of one of her music pieces that she used to play for the movies. My mother was a very educated lady but I think she preferred to play piano than go out to work.

My father was a ship's engineer and his ship went down following a torpedo attack during the 1914-1918 war and my mother's playing was to provide our living expenses. On account of this my mother married again and her husband was an engineer for Durham Town Council. This is how we came to live in the Hetton area.

When I left school my mother got me a job with the Gaumont Film Company at Newcastle. This meant a long daily travel for me to Newcastle. At 7.30 each morning I would catch a bus, one of the old type S.D.O. Bristol 5 step-up type, and when I got to Houghton I took a tramcar to Fence Houses, then I took a train to Gateshead, then walked over the High Level bridge to Westgate Road and the office of Gaumonts in St. John's Street.

During my employment for Gaumont over a period of about three and a half years, I learnt quite a lot about the film business. This experience covered film repair, dispatch films, helping as an assistant with taking local news films, developing, printing and understanding AC and DC electrical systems. Our newsreel was called the Gaumont Graphic. My assisting with the movie making work was a wide field covering articles from Royalty to local disasters and sporting events. I recall of two Royal visits to the area, the then Princess Royal

and Lord Lascelles came to the maternity hospital in City Road and I recall having to sit on the ward floor to hold the camera tripod legs, as the floor was so slippery, as we took pictures of a patient in bed giving the Princess a bouquet of flowers, this demanded a angle shot. Another Royal occasion was at the Children's Hospital at Gateshead when the Princess Marie Louise paid a visit. I must mention now about our camera expert, he was called Montgomery and unfortunately was lost at sea during World War 2 when he was taking pictures of the convoys taking supplies to the Russian front. "Monty" was a sad loss to the film business, his craft included all types of projection and electrical knowledge and it from him that I got my knowledge of all the aspects of the film business. After a time, on days of shooting films, we returned to the Gaumont complex and started to develop and print the copies of the prints we required to send out to the cinemas which ran the Gaumont news films. This meant developing the film, washing the film to remove the chemicals and drying the positives on special equipment and doing the editing. The room we did this in was of a very special nature- completely free from dust and at the right temperature where there were special drying drums.

I must mention that when I started work at Gaumont in 1922 my wage was 12 shillings and six pence per week. When I left after three and a half years later my wage was 18 shillings per week. Not much left after all the travelling expenses. I arrived back in Hetton about 7.30. in the evening. So now we are back to work in Hetton. Somehow I got a job with Sid Sparrow, working in his garage at Bog Row and there I got a good knowledge of motor vehicles. Also Sid taught me to drive. This was day work so at night I got an evening job at Barton's Pavilion Cinema as operator (projectionist) and it was one night in 1926 when a spark from one of the arc lamps (carbon negative and positive) set fire to a reel of film. It was quite a fire, I had quite a lot of my hair burnt off and in trying to put out the fire with a bucket of sand I dropped down an iron spiral staircase into the film rewinding room below. This was because I had missed my step crossing the projector room floor. As I lay on the floor below in the rewinding room, a drop of approximately 9 feet the sand bucket was on my head and sand all down my neck and back. The fire was put out in due course and the Pavilion was out of action for a week.

About this time in 1926/7 the talking picture equipment started to be installed in cinemas. I made application to British Talking Picture Company "to get in on the act", they sent me to the Hippodrome, Easington which had just got the talking picture equipment installed and after a month at the Hippodrome, I got all the gen about all the trials and tribulations and problems associated with showing talking pictures. Believe me there were difficulties such as when a speeding bus passed the cinema there was vibration which caused trouble with the valves and the sound track. Sometimes it was funny when a woman was talking when it should have been a man. This was due to the sound track not being synchronised with the film. The sound track was attached to the bottom of the film but sometimes they did not operate together. The sound track was triggered by a light shining through the film to a photo electric cell then on to a first stage amplifier then on to a second

stage amplifier, then on to an output amplifier of up to 10 valves then on to the speakers behind the screen.

When the Cosy in Easington Lane opened in 1938 I got the job of Chief Projectionist and Electrician. This was because of my vast experience in the cinema business. After leaving the Cosy I did a spell of bus driving, a job that I hated and after a while I packed it in and got a job as Chief Projectionist/Electrician at the Plaza Cinema in Hylton Road in Sunderland. The Plaza had a Western Electric sound system which I soon became familiar with. It was always my practice to test for sound on the projector during the morning in preparation for the afternoon performance. This was just in case there was any trouble which had developed and checking the equipment to make sure all was O.K. The morning in question, I did the test for the sound on both projectors and found that one of the projectors had developed a fault. So I did tests and found out that the first stage amplifier did not respond so on closer inspection I discovered that the HT (high tension current) on the first stage valve was not working. I then phoned the Western Electric Co. In Newcastle and asked them to send out a new part that I required. The Western Electric manager then came on the phone and asked me about the trouble and after I explained to him he said that I must be wrong as that type of fault could never happen. I replied that it had happened, so what I needed was the new part. At this he got all hett up and said it had never happened before and that I didn't know what I was talking about. Anyway out came the Service Manager from Newcastle to inspect the fault and when he had finished inspecting the amplifier he said "By golly you're right". He said that in his long service with Western Electric I was the only person to be proved right in their diagnosis and for him to be wrong!. When he got back to Newcastle he posted off to me a special badge to wear in my lapel which read "Western Electric Honorary Sound Engineer. " I still have the badge today.

I moved from the Plaza at Sunderland to the Ritz in Park Lane staying at the Ritz for six years. I remember one night we had fire in the power room, next to the projection room. One of the large 200 amp switches had overheated and caught fire. After 15 minutes I had the show going again by by-passing the overheating switch with heavy duty cable. (The show must go on!).

On leaving the Ritz I started in the motor coach business. This business went well doing school contracts and private hire. My big trouble was getting planning permission for a garage. The building was the old chapel at High Moorsley and the Council did not agree with my planning requirements so I sold my two buses and put my house on the market and decided to move to Bournemouth. In the meantime while waiting for my house to be sold I took a job at the Grand Cinema at Houghton as projectionist. I remember the title of the last film that I showed at the Grand was "My Fair Lady".

During my life I have had spells of driving buses and coaches but most of my working life has been in the cinema business. During the Second World War I had war service with the RASC heavy transport moving tanks and supplies including petrol and ammunition to

front line positions from D Day in Normandy to Hitler's bunker in Berlin. In this last position in December 1945 I was assigned as NCO driver to Major General Sir. J.C. Marriott, DSO, MC, Guards Armoured Division

Find enclosed a copy of the Cosy Cinema Company's reference for me when I left.

All the best

Roger Dixon