

The Conversion to Sound of the Kingsway and the Ideal

Cinemas in King's Heath, 1929-1932

This paper is something of a companion piece to another paper I delivered at the British Silent Film Festival Symposium in London last month.

[SLIDE 2]

Both concern the Kingsway and Ideal Cinemas in King's Heath, a suburb in the south of Birmingham, and the minutes of the monthly board meetings the cinema's directors held. The minutes provide a wealth of potential information for the cinema researcher, being a relatively detailed account not only of the minute details of running a cinema in the twenties and thirties, but also of the business decisions made by this board of directors, and the factors that motivated these decisions.

[SLIDE 3]

The minute book also provides weekly statements of profit gained by the cinema. This data is much less granular than the admissions ledgers that survive for some cinemas, such as the Regent Cinema in Portsmouth – on which Sue Harper has done much important work – and the Tudor Cinema in Leicester.

[SLIDE 4]

The Tudor records show daily takings for each individual programme, the number of individual tickets, and the costs of renting each programme. All the same, the financial information contained in the Kingsway Minutes is sufficient to observe trends and patterns, and can be compared to more substantial datasets like the Tudor.

Furthermore, the minutes book provides information that ledgers cannot, such as, for the purposes of this paper, telling two contrasting stories of the transition to sound.

[SLIDE 5 – ANIMATED X3]

King's Heath had been a settlement since the 18th century, largely occupied by farmers and farmland. The 1800s brought investment from the wealthy businessmen of Birmingham, who saw the village as a pleasant but convenient retreat from the congestion of the city proper. The village blossomed during the late 19th century, connecting to the city both by trams and urban sprawl; in 1911 Birmingham acquired King's Heath* officially, replacing its farms with residential suburbia* and growing its population and spread*. It was served by two cinemas*: the relatively small Ideal Picture House opened in 1915 and the larger super cinema, The Kingsway opened in 1925. In 1928, fears of competition from the newly opened Tudor Cinema just south of King's Heath spurred the directors of the Kingsway Cinema to swiftly acquire the Ideal, a decision that they soon regretted.

[SLIDE 6 - ANIMATED]

Before diving into the records, I'd best introduce the illustrious board of directors of the Kingsway Cinema Ltd. Some names worth highlighting include that of Sidney Clift, who would go on to form the Clifton chain of cinemas in the late thirties, of which the Kingsway became a part in the fifties. His sometime business partner – and full-time father in law – was William Astley, and together they joined the Kingsway's board through the investment of capital. Mr W. H. Bull was a notable member of the Midland Branch of the Cinema Exhibitor's Association, serving variously on the Cinema Hospital Committee, Emergency Committee, Joint Committee with Justices and as a delegate for

the Branch at the General Council. Mr. S. W. B. Stephen represented the Kingsway at the CEA.

[SLIDE 7 – ANIMATED]

William Walter Turner ran a nationally successful cinema furnishings company in his own name. Indeed, as Geoff Brown found out, his company created and marketed a cinema chair inspired by Stirling Castle[*]. “The Stirling chair reflects the traditional Stirling Castle strength.”

[SLIDE 8]

In 1927, the cinema hired a renowned violinist from Belgium by the name of Louis Vereycken, at the exorbitant salary of £15/15/- per week. At the time his engagement had seemed to be a great coup for the humble Kingsway, but in the years that followed his position at the cinema grew all the more tenuous. In July 1929, Vereycken asked the board for a personal loan of £40 to cover some financial problems that he had acquired. This proved to be the final straw, for he was summarily fired from his position. The search for a musical director to replace him is strictly cost-limited – they set a maximum salary of £10 per week. All the same, they receive 91 replies within the month to their classified advertisement, and soon hire a man named Mr. Worth from Newport in South Wales, at a salary of £9/9/- per week, a substantial saving on Vereycken’s £15/15/-. It could be possible that the strict ceiling on pay for the musical director stemmed from their regret at hiring the expensive Belgian violinist, but it is perhaps not coincidental that in the same July meeting where the board decided to fire him, they also decided to ask Western Electric to perform a survey of the Kingsway for conversion to the Talkies.

[SLIDE 9]

By August 1929, discussions had begun regarding the various apparatus options available to the Kingsway. Western Electric's equipment was reported to cost £1900, whilst the Klangfilm system – made in Germany – cost £3500. Despite the vastly higher reported price, the board seem to have been inclined towards Klangfilm; they received reports from the managers of the Lyric and Era cinemas about the system, and had heard that Lozells Picture House in north Birmingham was going to install the system. They made plans to hear their system once it was ready. The reasons for the board's apparent preference for Klangfilm is unclear; it is true that during this period of late 1929 Tobis-Klangfilm was in a heated battle with Western Electric over the patent rights of sound apparatus within Europe, and some general sentiment against being beholden to American business interests was pervasive throughout the British cinema industry. Regardless, the Lozells installation of Klangfilm Talkie apparatus proved to be unsuccessful – at least according to the board's opinion – and at this time the Kingsway board opted instead to go for Western Electric equipment.

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By this time it was October 1929, and SWB Stephen strongly urged the rest of the board to commit to converting the cinema to sound. Western Electric was paid £25 to survey the cinema prior to conversion, and costs began to be estimated. In October the Chairman had reported that the apparatus would cost the Company £2150, as well as £4 a week in service charges; however, by November this figured had somehow risen to £2800, as well as £195 for non-synchronous equipment, totalling £2995 – as well as the weekly £4 service charge. Western Electric also offered a payment scheme, where £312/6/- would be

paid upfront, £458/9/- would be paid on completion of installation, and 104 payments of £26/5/- would be made weekly. This would ultimately cost £500 more than paying for it all upfront, and the board decided to take the cheaper option, sending Clift to the bank to see if they can stretch their overdraft. Western Electric agreed to these terms and gave December 23rd as a date of completion.

Further costs were forthcoming. Horace Bradley, the cinema architect, was also consulted; alterations must be made so the cinema can house the new sound equipment. A builder, Mr. Fenwick, was paid £270 for his work on these alterations; local electricians Parker, Winder & Achurch, who had done much work on the Kingsway in the past, were contracted for £57 to work alongside Western Electric during the installation. Two new projectors were deemed necessary, as the old ones were now considered obsolete; the Company paid £165 for the projectors and managed to raise £25 by selling the old ones. An extra assistant operator was hired, due to the added complexity of projecting Talkies. The stage of the Kingsway is covered in felt, likely as a form of acoustic treatment, dulling the reflective uncarpeted surface to reduce reverberation.

December 30th was chosen as the date for the reopening of the Kingsway, newly wired for sound. By this point, at least fifteen other cinemas in Birmingham had transitioned to sound. The board decided to wait until after Christmas to give their musicians their notice; on December 28th, they were told that they would only be employees of the Kingsway for two more weeks. In January, the musical director Mr. Worth appealed to the board for aid, having spent £30 of his own money moving to King's Heath from Newport for this job just four months earlier. The board leave this to the Chairman, to deal with at his own discretion, and the Chairman finds it in his heart to

give Mr. Worth £10 for his troubles. The board also discussed which film to open their Talkie programme with. Initial enthusiasm for *Broadway Melody* was tempered by the fact that it had already played for quite some time in Birmingham. Other options considered include *Smiling Irish Eyes* with Colleen Moore, and *Glad Rag Doll* with Dolores Costello.

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Ultimately, Talkies arrived at the Kingsway with *The Rainbow Man*, with Eddie Dowling and Marian Nixon. The film played for three days, before the programme changed to *Broadway Melody*. That week saw the Kingsway's highest profits in almost two years, and began a period of markedly higher returns for the cinema. Due to the nature of the financial information obtainable from the minutes book, it is not possible to ascribe this purely to the popularity of sound films; this may also reflect the savings made by the dismissal of the musical staff. Furthermore, matinees are increased to four days a week soon after the transition.

[SLIDE 12]

This trend does correspond with that of the figures from the Tudor cinema in Leicester, whose ledger book does contain figures specifically related to ticket sales. There the arrival of sound's impact on the trend line is apparently very slightly more muted, but still readily apparent.

[SLIDE 13]

The Kingsway had its most profitable weeks ever during the early months of its transition, with *Sunnyside Up* with Janet Gaynor showing for a full week from April 21st, and *The Desert Song* with John Boles showing for a full week from May 12th. Buoyed by this

success, the board began reconsidering earlier plans to expand the cinema; indeed they appear to have thought that there was money being lost because they could not accommodate enough patrons. This quickly turned them on to the idea of wiring the Ideal for sound as well.

[SLIDE 14]

The Ideal cinema was in relatively bad shape. From the moment of acquisition, the cinema only made financial losses for the Company. It is quite likely that the apparent promise of a reversal of fortune that sound offered may have motivated the board's decision to wire the cinema, not to mention the swift rate with which Birmingham's other cinemas were being converted. Initially the Company intended for British Thomson-Houston to survey the Ideal for conversion to sound. BTH was an engineering firm owned by the American firm General Electric and based out of Rugby, quite close to Birmingham. The plan was to make inquiries about BTH's so-called Junior Talkie set, which cost a very palatable £750.

[SLIDE 15]

The company decided to go for sound at the Ideal in March, and by April architectural plans had been commissioned and a provisional date for the launch of sound films at the cinema was set for May 26th.

Issues quickly crop up, unfortunately. The Junior BTH set was found to be unsuitable for the cinema, and once again the Company was forced to consider Western Electric instead, who appeared to be offering a smaller apparatus for £1285. The launch date for talkies at the Ideal was pushed back, and on May 27th – a day after they'd hoped to reopen with BTH equipment – they discovered that Western Electric in fact did not

have a set for £1285; the cheapest option was £1730. By July they had managed to whittle this price down to £1555, but the cinema also needed to be converted from direct current to alternating current, at a cost of around £230. The Company was looking at a total cost, including architectural alterations and the extended operating box, of over £2000. They began to have doubts as to whether maintaining the cinema was a sound financial decision, but the idea of surrendering the Ideal was an uncomfortable one, due to the possibility of someone else running it and competing with the Kingsway. Rumours had also begun that another cinema was being planned in the vicinity and, reminiscent of the paranoid streak the board showed when faced with the threat of the Tudor on Haunch Lane, this seems to have spurred them to definitively choose to wire the Ideal. The installation process was long and drawn out. The cinema was closed for conversion in mid-September, but didn't reopen for business with sound films until early December.

[SLIDE 16]

Things looked bad immediately. The Ideal didn't turn its fortunes around in any meaningful way. In contrast to the stark increase in profits for the Kingsway after transition, the Ideal barely made any more money and continued to mark losses on the ledger. This may be due to the Ideal's small size, which reduced audience throughput; it could have also been because the savings the Kingsway made by losing its musicians could not be replicated at the Ideal, which only had a pianist. After listening to Trevor Griffiths's talk yesterday, I'd imagine that the increase in Entertainments Tax is also a likely contributing factor. The tax hike causes the board to raise ticket prices at the Kingsway, and probably contributed to its own downward slump in the latter half of 1931 and into 1932. Extra costs had been incurred during the conversion. The Company

lawyers required £2/2/- for legal costs; the electricians needed £39/10/11 for improving the heating apparatus; the architect required £200 for alterations (but will accept £85); the Quantity Surveyors required £135. To save money, the company chose to buy outright the Western Electric equipment at the Ideal, saving about £280. They also cut down the number of programmes distributed for the cinema and decided to sell advertising slides - shown during screenings to patrons - in-house, rather than using a third-party agent, to raise more money; advertising, which was once the domain of the manager, is brought into the boardroom. To make matters worse, the Ideal's doorman had been stealing money from the company, making off with £29/14/10.

Ultimately, in March 1931 - less than three months after converting to sound - the Company began discussing the idea of cutting their losses and selling the Ideal. The board approached a potential buyer to entice them to buy the Ideal, a partnership of four businessmen Hillier, Parker, May & Rowden, but they were not interested. Interest did come from another partnership, a Mr. Scott and Mr. Donada, who expressed a desire to buy the Kingsway - not the Ideal. The board decide to offer the Kingsway for £55,000 - including the ailing Ideal and the liability for its lease as part of the deal. Ultimately the buyers also decided that it was not a good idea.

[SLIDE 17]

Desperate to get out of bed with the Ideal, the board approached Mr. Reynolds, who was renting them the building, to let them out of their lease early. Despite their initial offer to Reynolds being called "an insult to his intelligence," Reynolds was willing to let them out of the deal for £1500. Reynolds did however concoct a scheme in which he aimed to buy the shop adjoining the Ideal and sell the two as a combined unit - he

ostensibly had a prospective buyer lined up. The negotiations for this deal stretched on for months, holding up the Company's escaping the lease agreement from October 1931 to March 1932. At that point, the sale broke down and the board again requested to be released. Rather poignantly, in the meeting of October 1931, board member SWB Stephen suggested that the Ideal revert back to showing silent films, an idea the board seemed willing to entertain but for the fact that silent films were already a rare commodity for rental.

After negotiating their payment of compensation down from £1500 to £1150, Reynolds agreed to let the Company release the Ideal cinema, and also agreed that it would not be reopened as a cinema again. The lease was cancelled by March 22nd, and the cinema closed forever on April 2nd 1932. The sound equipment from the Ideal was sold to the Grove Cinema for £900, about £600 less than what the Company paid for it a year earlier. For all the success that the Kingsway had with its transition, the Ideal's failure hamstrung the Company - after incurring debts of over £5000, the board resolved to appropriate £1000 yearly from the Kingsway's profits to cover the Ideal's losses.

[SLIDE 18]

The contrasting fates of the Kingsway and the Ideal are told through numerous small and highly specific details, yet they offer clues that may help tell the story of the transition to sound across the country. As discussed in the previous companion piece to this paper, much work needs to be done to place this data into a wider context; yet for now, the records offer a compelling and detailed case study of independent exhibitors and their lurching conversion to the talkies.