

Directing the Kingsway Cinema, 1927

Cinema records and documents from the silent period in Britain are few and far between. Their discovery often helps to shed new light on old assumptions, and provide local, specific examples with which to compare wider national and international trends. They have often been used to explore local community tastes and preferences, in order to place them within wider contexts. This approach informs the work of scholars such as Sue Harper on the Regent Cinema in Portsmouth¹, Julian Poole on the Majestic in Macclesfield², and Steve Chibnall and Guy Barefoot on the Tudor Cinema in Leicester³.

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A rather interesting record exists for the Kingsway Cinema, a super cinema built in the Birmingham suburb of King's Heath and opened in 1925. It is a minutes book, that details the monthly meetings of the cinema's board of directors, in which they plan and react in both the short and long terms in order to optimise their cinema's chances in the marketplace. It covers the period from July 1926 to April 1938. The records have some use for establishing taste patterns within the community the cinema served, yet this usefulness is limited in several key ways.

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¹ Harper, 'A Lower Middle-Class Taste-Community in the 1930s'; Harper, 'Fragmentation and Crisis'.

² Poole, 'British Cinema Attendance in Wartime'.

³ Chibnall, *Quota Quickies: The Birth of the British 'B' Film*.

The revenue figures are given as a general profit statement, rather than being broken down by individual tickets sold; the cinema's programme usually changed twice a week, yet the statements are only given weekly; and as a statement of profit, there is no way to account for changes in expenses that the cinema incurred, which would affect these figures.

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An idea of the more profitable films can be suggested, but with much less certainty than with more thorough records like those extant for the Tudor Cinema in Leicester, which include numbers of tickets sold and amount of money taken in for each individual screening, as well as the costs of renting the programme and even the weather each day.

As can be seen, the minutes book is a sub-optimal source for discerning the cinema's financial accounts. Yet this limitation is balanced by the fairly unique insight the minutes offer as to the other aspects of running a cinema. This paper aims to present some of these insights, through a deep dive into the month-by-month account of decisions made by the cinema's Board of Directors in 1927. Each month will have a different theme.

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DECEMBER 1926 – THE BOARD

Let's start at the tail end of 1926. The Board held a meeting on Tuesday the 14th of December, with all members in attendance. Some linoleum floor samples were

presented by Mr. Turner, for consideration during the cinema's present refurbishment efforts – Turner also reporting that new cinema seats previously discussed were to be delivered shortly.

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The redecoration efforts were in very capable hands, for William Walter Turner had for some years already been involved with W. W. Turner and Company Limited, a cinema furnishing company, with national clients as far afield as the Majestic in Nelson, Lancashire, and the Gaumont Palace in Plymouth. Indeed, 1927 proved lucrative for the company, with 24,000 units sold during nine months of the year.⁴

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It would seem that Turner had an eye for these things, for the Kingsway was quite opulent with its distinctive orange and green colour scheme and striking auditorium chandelier.⁵

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Turner wasn't the only illustrious member of the Kingsway Board of Directors. Of the six founding directors of the cinema, the most notable name is likely that of Sidney Clift, who would later go on to form the regionally-significant Clifton chain of cinemas with his business partner Leon Salberg. The death of the board's longstanding chairman George Parker in 1935 would see Clift adopt the mantle of

⁴ *Kinematograph Year Book*, 1927

⁵ Geens, *From King's Heath to the Country, Including Maypole, Yardley Wood, and Happy Valley*, 63; Wilkinson and Hanson, *Birmingham Cinemas*, 58–60.

chairman, though the Kingsway wouldn't find its way officially into the Clifton chain until the 1950s.⁶ As discussed in Alex Rock's work on the Clifton Chain, William Astley was Clift's first partner in the cinema business, having in 1914 invested a hundred pounds into Astley's cinema The Empire, in the Birmingham suburb of Stirchley.⁷ Astley and Clift found their way onto the Board of the Kingsway through the investment of capital, a pattern that Clift would repeat during the building of the Clifton chain. Not-coincidentally, Clift was also married to Astley's daughter.

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JANUARY 1927 – MUSICIANS

1927 quickly brought trouble for the Kingsway Directors. The orchestra's Cornet player had been discovered masterminding a scheme in which he abandoned his station at the Kingsway in order to play at a different theatre, sending someone else to perform in his place. The manager forthrightly suspended the musician, and the Board were emphatic that no orchestra members were allowed to have a deputy without their permission. It is perhaps indicative of the importance of cinema musicians, particularly ones good enough to pull off such a nefarious scheme, that the Cornet player was nonetheless re-engaged for another three months.

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⁶ Hornsey, *The Clifton Story*, 14.

⁷ Rock, 'Super Cinemas in the Suburbs: Clifton Cinemas and the Difficulties of Independent Exhibition, 1934-1966', 38.

January also brings a resolution that Director SWB Stephen is to be appointed as the cinema's representative at the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association.

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The Board were already very well represented in the CEA's Birmingham and Midlands branch by this time, as such an illustrious Board might hope to be. Astley was [*] Treasurer, WH Bull served on the [*] Cinema Hospital Committee, both were on the [*] Emergency Committee along with [*] Clift, Bull and Turner were on the [*] Joint Committee with Justices, and Bull was a [*] delegate for the Branch. The Kingsway was comfortably plugged into the regional and national ecosystem of independent cinemas. It's no surprise that Stephen would be appointed to represent the cinema – he was essentially the only board member left.

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Such strong ties to the CEA also required solidarity with its causes, and the Kingsway Board passed a resolution reflecting the Birmingham Branch's decision to boycott films distributed by the Famous Players-Lasky company. At a CEA meeting on January 11th, this boycott was called for after Famous Players had acquired the Futurist and Scala theatres, both prominent in Birmingham and representing a major incursion by production interests into the exhibition space. While the boycott never received the full union backing nationwide, in March an agreement was reached between the CEA and Famous Players by which both the Futurist and Scala were to be leased to British subjects, and the boycott removed. An outcome for which the Kingsway can claim some small part of the collective credit.

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MARCH 1927 – NEW MANAGEMENT

The Kingsway had opened in 1925 under the management of Mr. JH Richardson, but by at least mid-1926 had come under the stewardship of Mr. RR Smith. This was not to be for long, however, for he tendered his resignation in March of 1927. As a last noble act, in the previous month he requested a raise for the cinema's Page Boy – from ten shillings to twelve-and-six – and an unquantified raise for Mr. Holdback, the cinema's operator. Prior to tendering his resignation, Smith had found a candidate to replace him in Mr. W. Campbell. Campbell had recently left the Theatre De Luxe in Gloucester, luckily for the Board of the Kingsway although probably unluckily for Campbell, as he would miss out on the Theatre De Luxe becoming Britain's fourth cinema to convert to sound two years later in February 1929[**NOT TRUE**]. The Board offer Campbell a starting salary of £8 a week, as well as £10 to cover his moving expenses, and a £50 loan to help him buy a house next month. He began work on the 28th of March, and the transition was a smooth one.

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APRIL 1927 – THE BALANCE SHEET

The April Board meeting brings the year-end Balance Sheet and Trading Account for the year ending on the 26th of March. A net profit is shown of just over £4268, mainly representing business done in 1926. The year-end report in 1928, which in turn mainly reflects the fortunes of 1927, shows net profit rising to £5870, a rather

good year for the cinema. Profits decline sharply in the following years, however, falling to £3259 in the 1928/29 financial year, and £2163 in the 1929/30 financial year, less than half the profits of just two years prior. Due to the lack of granular detail in these financial records, it is difficult to discern the causes of these changing fortunes. For the profitable year of 1927, The CEA Annual Report suggests that the weather may be to thank for good business, writing “The lack of a summer had its compensations for Exhibitors in increased attendances, which carried them over until the winter months.”⁸ Incidentally, the Report also noted that the slump in business which usually precedes Christmas period was one of “the worst and longest ever known,”⁹ which is reflected in the weekly profits for the Kingsway. A week which saw screenings of *The Scarlet Letter* with Lillian Gish, and Rin-Tin-Tin’s *Tracked By The Police* also saw a single-week loss of just over £50 – which, as we have learned, is enough to employ a cinema manager for six weeks, or to help him buy a house. Still, this was an improvement on the Christmas Week of 1926, which will be discussed shortly.

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The declining profits between 1928 and 1930 can possibly be attributed to a number of factors. Most persuasive, and the primary reason cited by the CEA in 1928, is the decline in general industry nationwide, particularly in the basic trades which a city like Birmingham would have so greatly relied upon. The audience of the

⁸ Cinematograph Exhibitors’ Association, ‘Annual Report for Year Ending December 31st, 1927’, 5.

⁹ Ibid.

Kingsway was a habitual one, rarely moved by anything but the most exceptional of programmes; as the prospects of the economy darkened, so too did attendance dwindle. The dawning of the sound era would have only brought greater competition for tightly rationed entertainment budgets; the cinema did not convert to sound until the very first week of 1930, by which time at least sixteen other Birmingham cinemas were already wired. The Kingsway would not see profits as healthy as those of 1927 for many years.

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MAY 1927 – BOOKINGS

The question of booking patterns came to the fore in May of 1927. The Board had previously resolved not to book any films at the cinema for more than three consecutive nights, no doubt to maintain the novelty that a habitually attending audience would crave. The last full-week bookings had been in December 1926, when a week of *The Sea Beast* featuring John Barrymore only brought in a £22 profit, and a week's programming of the war film *Mons* saw a loss of £12. This was followed by the biggest loss recorded in the entire minute book, when *The Flood* with George O'Brien and *The Still Alarm* with Helene Chadwick respectively played in the first and second half of Christmas week. The Kingsway suffered an £80 loss, and the whole unfortunate period seems to have made the Board more cautious about booking out entire weeks since.

Nonetheless, the Chairman George Parker proposed making an exception for a film that was sweeping its way through the box offices worldwide: *Ben-Hur*. Parker describes the Ramon Novarro film as exceptional, and worthy of a six-night booking, and the Board resolve to make it so. The allowance proves to be a very wise one, as the film – booked for a full week in mid-November that year – coincides with a mighty profit of almost £250, a weekly margin bested only four other times between 1926 and 1934. This despite the film being liberally programmed throughout the city, on dozens of screens, concurrently and in the preceding months. Sidney Clift likely remembered this resounding success when he opened his new cinema, the Robin Hood theatre, that year on Boxing Day, with *Ben Hur* playing on opening night.

[SLIDE 17 - ANIMATED]

SUMMER 1927 – EXPANSIONISM

In June 1927, Clift approached a Mr. Reynolds, the owner of the nearby Ideal Cinema, with the hope of buying the cinema on behalf of the Board. The Ideal had been in King's Heath over a decade longer than the Kingsway, but its position in the community had since been thoroughly displaced by the newer super cinema. Still, in June of 1927 Reynolds had no plans to sell, but offered first refusal to the Kingsway should he change his mind. Reynolds did offer up another cinema in his inventory – the [*] Olympia in Sparkbrook, for which he wanted £10,000 and a seat on the Board. The Company countered with £7,000 without any conditions, but negotiations broke down.

These expansionist notions were likely spurred on by a rumour that had recently surfaced and by July had gained the full attention of the Board. It appeared that a cinema was being planned for construction on [*] Haunch Lane, a mere mile and a half from the Kingsway and conveniently located for many of its patrons. The Board didn't waste time getting to the bottom of this; in the July meeting they resolved to visit the proposed site immediately after adjourning, although not before also resolving to purchase a new typewriter. Clift, with his partner Leon Salberg, began exploring the possibility of constructing a cinema on [*] May Lane, less than a half-mile from the Haunch Lane site; meanwhile, Turner was in discussion with a Mr. Perkins, who had approached the Board to try and get them interested in financing the Haunch Lane project. The Board suffered several long months of confusion and uncertainty.

By December, they had decided that the May Lane proposal was a non-viable one, considering the Haunch Lane cinema that was to be built. They also decided not to become financially involved with the Haunch Lane project, forgoing any further negotiations. In March 1929, the [*] Tudor Cinema opened on the Haunch Lane site, providing a comfortable and conveniently situated local alternative to the Kingsway. As damaging as the effects of economic depression may have been, it is likely that the opening of the Tudor caused proved equally harmful to the profits of the Kingsway. It also appears to have caused something of a panic for its Board. In late 1928, the aforementioned Mr. Reynolds offered his Ideal Cinema for sale to the owners of the

Tudor, which the Kingsway Company did not take kindly to – Astley reminded Reynolds of his prior agreement to give the Kingsway first refusal, and the Board resolved within a few weeks to acquire the Ideal. The haste with which this deal was brokered, compared to the exploratory process surrounding both the Haunch and May Lane potential investments, is notable, and may be partly to blame for the difficulties that running the Ideal presents the Board in the early 1930s. For the ninety-five weeks the Company owned the Ideal, it only returned a weekly profit six times.

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WINTER 1927 – OTHER BUSINESS

The screening of *Ben Hur* proved a huge success in November, and served as a fitting swansong for two of the cinema's employees – Mr. Holdback, the operator, and Mr. Harold Timperley, the musical director. Timperley only directed the orchestra for one more week after *Ben Hur*, before his departure. He did manage to secure extra pay for the orchestra's efforts during the programming of *Ben Hur*, making its healthy profit all the more remarkable. The Company had been advertising for Timperley's replacement, and found a very illustrious candidate in Louis Vereycken, a Belgian concert violinist who had played for royalty around the world and was currently appearing in Nottingham. Vereycken's requested salary was £15/15/- per week, which was negotiated down to £12 by the time he was hired. This dwarfed the salary of Mr Campbell the manager, at £8 a week. Furthermore, Vereycken's pay rose to £15/15/-

over the next eighteen months. Campbell is granted a bonus and a £1 raise in December for his own efforts during the *Ben Hur* week, although it could be argued that this is partly influenced by the amount of financial compensation given to the musicians.

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Vereycken was easily the most prized jewel in the Kingsway's possession, and they advertised his engagement heavily as such. Still, over the years the relationship between the musical director and the Board soured, to the point where in June 1929 they asked him to resign. His presence no longer warranted the huge salary he drew, and he was still finding himself in enough financial trouble to be asking for loans from the Board. By this time the spectre of the talkies was looming, and the Board resolved only to spend £10 a week on a new musical director. The new director, a Mr. Worth, was engaged in September 1929, only to be summarily fired two weeks after Christmas when the Kingsway converted to sound. Upset, Worth requested £30 from the Board to cover his moving expenses. After consideration, they gave him £10.

CONCLUSION

The Minutes Book is a fascinating resource that serves as a compelling window into a rarely viewed side of cinema history. Whilst its idiosyncrasies present challenges for both longitudinal and latitudinal investigation, it is perhaps those idiosyncrasies that make it so interesting. Much work needs to be done to situate these

records in context, but there is also much pleasure to be derived from just browsing its pages.

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