

Green's of Glasgow: 'We Want "U" In'

- Janet McBain

The Greens were a large Lancashire family of travelling fairground showmen in the later 19th century. The patriarch, George Green settled in Glasgow in 1894, establishing a home for the nascent family enterprise in the city. Within little more than a year he had acquired a permanent site for what became their signature Glasgow entertainment venue, the 'Carnival', in the heart of the working class East End.

George Green's entry into the cinema exhibition came in the autumn of 1896 when,

on a trip to London to seek out novelties for his shows, he purchased Robert Paul's Theatrograph projector. The first public performance of this apparatus was given at Christmas 1896 in the circus building on the Carnival site. Green also started a travelling cinematograph show in 1898 with a programme that included local topical films made by Mitchell & Kenyon.¹ The family did not give up their travelling shows until 1914. Green meanwhile began to invest in permanent fixed site cinema shows, one source dating this from as early as 1902, with the acquisition of the 1000 seat Whitevale Theatre in Glasgow's heavily populated Gallowgate, still in the East End of the city.² The whole family, which included three sons and four daughters, moved into a flat above the Whitevale's pay box and each had a job in the family business.

The Whitevale was a success and encouraged Green to expand the business by developing more permanent sites around the city. Each cinema in this new circuit was called Picturedrome, with the name prefaced by the district in which it was located. These first of these, in the Gorbals area, opened in 1911. Unusually for the time, the whole building was new and purpose built for pictures. More commonly in this period, cinemas tended to operate in conversions of existing buildings, such as roller-skating rinks, churches, variety halls and warehouses, and such purpose building was well in advance of the new trend.

This period proved to be a seminal one for cinema development. The 1909 Cinematograph Act, which came into force in 1910, brought new licensing regulations for premises intended for the showing of moving pictures, prompted by a



• Green's Playhouse Dundee, c. 1960s.

series of fires and public safety scandals among the rough and ready bioscope and other fly-by-night establishments that had sprung up to cater for moving pictures in their first phase of popularity. The first round of licences in Glasgow under the new Act amounted to 57, and Green's were the only existing city based exhibitors to take out more than one, applying for two of the new licences.

Green's Picturedromes were located in the East End and in the south west of the city, predominantly working class areas that became ever more densely populated as workers flocked to Glasgow's industries. Areas such as Bridgeton, Gorbals and Tollcross were tough districts whose crowded and decaying tenements became notorious in the inter-war years as the stamping grounds of violent gangs. However Green's cinemas were well appointed, attempting to bring a taste of luxury to the populace. The company slogan was 'If it's Good it's Green's!', which was also sometimes doubly presented with 'If it's Green's it's Good!' Indeed, Greens programmes were noted for their relatively good picture quality.



• Chaplin with Fred Green, believed to have been taken on Green's visit to the USA in 1919.



• Newspaper billing for Green's Picturehouse.

The Picturedrome circuit grew in the years leading up to the Great War. Between 1912 and 1914, 28 new cinemas were built in Glasgow, of which at least four were for Green's. In the 1914 *Kinematograph Year Book*, George Green alone is listed as a circuit proprietor in the Glasgow area, with other city rivals managing at most two or three halls. With his permanent sites and a number of touring cinematograph shows still operating, by the end of his career Green was hiring films for up to a dozen different exhibition outlets. After his death in 1915, his obituarist noted: 'The necessity of hiring for his own halls and touring outfits increased to such an extent that it became plain that a better system would be to buy his own films, and so successful did his purchases prove with the public that other showmen began to ask him to select their programmes'.³

This adeptness at putting on the screen what audiences seemed to want was the genesis of the next development in the family business during the early 'teens – the establishment of a film renting operation known as Green's Film Service. By the time of George Green's death, the circuit

- Green of Glasgow



- Newspaper billing for Green's Playhouse.

included ten cinemas and Green's Film Service had established renting offices in both London and Glasgow. The two surviving sons, Fred and Bert took over running the business. Their three sisters, according to anecdotal recollection, managed halls in the circuit.

Both Fred and Bert had been brought up in the tradition of fairground showmanship and had witnessed the growth of the enormous public appetite for cinema. Under their charge the business began to expand on all fronts. By 1917, another cinema had been added to the Glasgow circuit. Green's Film Service was advertising regularly to exhibitors across Scotland through the trade magazine, *The Entertainer* and *Scottish Kinema Record*, promoting its many departments. These included a Distribution service, which rented comedies, serials and dramas, a Mechanical Department selling projectors, and a Music Department renting sheet music. Green's had its own printing works, producing programmes, tickets, publicity materials and posters, and at the beginning of 1917 launched a trade magazine, *Green's Kinema Tatler*.

By 1917, Green's Film Service was also functioning as a production unit, making local topical and actualities for its own cinemas in Glasgow and the west of Scotland hinterland; and there is fleeting reference to a foray into feature film making in 1916 with a two-reel comedy entitled *His Highness*. The company had all the appearance of ambitions to become players on a national stage, perhaps following in the footsteps of another one-time regional renter, G. B. Samuelson.⁴

In October 1917 production activity was further developed with the announcement that Green's would shortly start handling production in Scotland for the *Topical Budget* newsreel⁵ and that they were about to launch a regular Scottish topical to be called the *Scottish Moving Picture News*. The title of this was changed to *British Moving Picture News* in May 1919, suggesting ambitions to establish a distribution market outside Scotland, but reverted to *Scottish* at the end of 1921, presumably indicating that this attempt had been unsuccessful. By now Green's had set up the Cinema Building Company, to handle the construction of halls for themselves and for other exhibitors. They also had a branch that sold cinema seating and furnishings, and offered an equipment repair and servicing facility. The company basically supplied all materials and services needed for the building and running of a cinema.

By 1927, it would appear that Green's had largely withdrawn from both production and renting, and were concentrating on exhibition and cinema construction. In this year they opened Green's Playhouse on Renfield Street, their first city centre venue which, with 4,400 seats, was the largest cinema in Europe at that time. 'We Want "U" In' was the graphic publicity slogan built on a slanted 'U' in the Playhouse signboard. The cinema was designed by Green's house architect John Fairweather and built by Green's staff. At its peak in the late 1920s, the cinema circuit comprised 24 halls in Central Scotland, with some 40,000 seats, and represented a great commercial success. Both Fred and Bert became the grand old men of the Cinematograph Exhibitors Association in

Scotland and Green's would remain pre-eminent in the Glasgow cinema business for decades.

Film historians have often cited the Associated British Picture Corporation, created in 1927 and incorporating the ABC cinema chain, as the first 'vertically integrated' company in British cinema,⁶ meaning that it had a commercial stake in each sector of the business: production, distribution and exhibition. It could be argued that Green's had already achieved this integration, and a degree of dominance over the early cinema industry, at least in Glasgow, in the decades preceding ABPC's formation. They produced newsreels and topicals, with a distribution business to get these and other films to market, and operated a cinema circuit which showed their product. Although this was clearly on a much smaller scale than ABC's later nationwide activity, being concentrated on a discrete urban area and its hinterland, and with only non-fiction production, it serves to illustrate an important aspect of early cinema, in which exhibitors saw distribution and production as a natural extension of their core business – selecting and making at least some of the films that they would then show to the audiences whom they knew and understood.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that Associated British Cinemas had its origins in Glasgow during the period when Green's 'vertical integration' was at its peak. John Maxwell, senior partner in the Glasgow law firm of Maxwell, Hodgson and Co, incorporated Scottish Cine and Variety Theatres in 1916, in partnership with local exhibitors James Wright and Jimmy Milne. Under his leadership the ABC circuit was created in the late 1920s, swallowing its Scottish parent and becoming the largest cinema circuit in Britain. This was then augmented by the acquisition of production companies, distributors and other

circuits, to emerge as the Associated British Picture Corporation in 1928, a leading company in the UK cinema landscape.⁷ It is a tantalising speculation that Maxwell might have been inspired by the local example of Green's.⁸

Notes

- 1 See Janet McBain, 'Mitchell and Kenyon's Legacy in Scotland – The Inspiration for a Forgotten Film-making Genre', in V. Toulmin, P. Russell and S. Popple, eds., *Electric Edwardians: The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon*, British Film Institute, 2005, pp. 113–124.
- 2 C. A. Oakley, *Fifty Years at the Pictures*, Scottish Film Council, 1946.
- 3 George Green obituary, *The Bioscope*, 25 Nov 1915, p. 929.
- 4 G. B. Samuelson (1888–1947) had been a renter in Birmingham before he joined forces with Will Barker to co-produce *Sixty Years a Queen* (1913) and launched Worton Hall Studios in the following year.
- 5 This was controlled by the War Office during the First World War. See Luke McKernan, *Topical Budget: The Great British News Film*, British Film Institute, 1992.
- 6 See, for instance, Sarah Street, *British National Cinema*, Routledge, 1997, pp. 6–7.
- 7 John Maxwell's early death in 1940 cut short his work to maintain a strong vertically integrated company. On his early principles and the history of the company, see Vincent Porter, 'All Change at Elstree: Warner Brothers, ABPC and British Film Policy, 1945–61', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2001, pp. 5–35.
- 8 This short essay is adapted from a paper presented in the 'Cities and Cinema' panel at the Centre for Contemporary British History conference on Media History, held at the Institute for Historical Research, University of London, in June 2005. It draws on research relating to the provenance of the small collection of films credited to Green's Film Service which is preserved Scottish Screen Archive. An authoritative and fully researched history of George Green, and of early film exhibition in Glasgow, remains to be undertaken.