

# Britain's very first cinema

Mark Trompeteler recently visited The Polytechnic Building, in Regent Street, London, to report on the birthplace of British cinema and plans to refurbish it and develop it.

Although there have been various centenary celebrations of a number of historic cinemas in the UK, the inevitable consequence of the first wave of cinema building that occurred in the first decade of the twentieth century, only one historic site, the Regent Street Polytechnic, can claim to have been the very first commercial cinema in the UK.

## A proud association

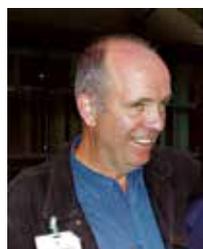
Peter Hort, Course Director of the Film & Television Production Course at the University of Westminster stood on the stage of the Princess Anne Theatre at BAFTA this year, at their annual Graduation Screening, and proudly stated that amongst all the universities of the world his must be the one with the longest direct association with cinema. The impressive Grade 2 listed building at 309 Regent Street, in close proximity to Oxford Circus and the BBC's HQ in London, Broadcasting House, opened in 1838 as The Polytechnic Institute. Later known as Regent Street Polytechnic it changed its name to Polytechnic of Central London (PCL) in 1970 as part of a national initiative for 30 new polytechnics to be formed across the UK. In 1992 PCL gained university status and was renamed the University of Westminster. Throughout the history of education at Regent Street there has been much as-



sociation with and pioneering work in photographic and film education at professional levels that could easily be the subject of another article. Key to the history of British cinema exhibition however, is the fact that commercial cinema exhibition started here in February 1896.

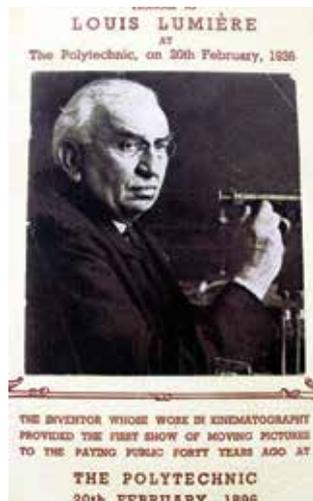
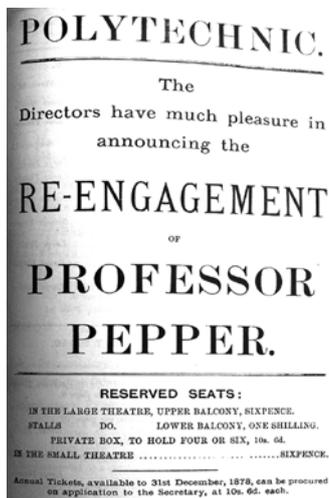
## A pivotal figure

Peter Hort's predecessor as Course Director of the Film Degree programme at Westminster was Joost Hunningher, a pivotal figure in film education at Westminster. Many *Cinema*



*Technology* readers may recall Joost as a significant figure behind two important early digital cinema conferences held in London a decade ago. Some readers may also still have vivid memories of the Cinema 100 celebrations held right across the UK in 1996 to mark one hundred years of

cinema in the UK. It was Joost who researched and wrote an important article entitled "Premiere on Regent Street" that sheds a lot of light on the commencement of the first regular commercial public exhibition of films at The Polytechnic in 1896. In visiting Regent Street to look at the birthplace



of British cinema Hunningher's article provides much of the important background information that underlines the significance of this site.

### Beginnings

Several inventors had successfully filmed and projected photographic moving pictures prior to 1896 in the UK. On October 14, 1888, Louis Le Prince used a single-lens motion picture camera to film "Roundhay Garden Scene". He exhibited his first films in the Whitley factory in Hunslet, Leeds and in Oakwood Grange, the Whitley home in Roundhay, Leeds, but they were never shown or distributed to the general public. On 21 June 1889, William Friese-Greene was issued with patent no. 10131 for his 'chronophotographic' camera. Friese-Greene gave a public demonstration in 1890 but the low frame rate (10 fps)

combined with the device's apparent unreliability made an unfavourable impression. The humorous magazine "Fun," reported on both 8 and 10 January 1895, that Edison's single viewer motion picture devices, Kinetoscopes, were on view at 432 Strand, London. The installation and exact opening date of this venue for non projected motion picture viewing in London is not known, but it would have been in the preceding year.

Birt Acres started shooting short film subjects with a camera produced by Robert Paul, at Barnet, Hertfordshire, from February / March 1895 onwards with Acres demonstrating his Kinectic Lantern to Lyonsdown Photographic Society, Barnet, on 10 January 1896 and then to the Royal Photographic Society, Hanover Square, London, on 14 January 1896.

Robert Paul demonstrated his Theatrograph at Finsbury Technical College, London, on 20 February 1896 and at the Royal Institution, Albermarle Street, London, on 28 February 1896.

What makes the Lumière brothers showing of motion pictures using their Cinematographe at The Polytechnic, Regent Street from 21 February 1896 onwards so significant is that they were the first regular public commercial showings of projected motion picture films in the UK and hence the actual birth date of commercial cinema exhibition in Britain.

### Britain's first cinema manager at Regent Street

The Lumière brothers, Auguste and Louis were in their early thirties, and together with their father, Antoine, had decided that the auditorium / hall at 309 Regent Street was a suitable venue to premiere their Cinematographe projected film exhibition system to the British public. They had seen the Edison Kinetoscope in action as early as 1894 and decided that a projector with an intermittent motion system based on the mechanical action of a sewing machine would be a preferable idea.

The world debut of the Lumières' Cinematographe took place in a hall in the Boulevard Capucines, Paris, in late December 1895, with a

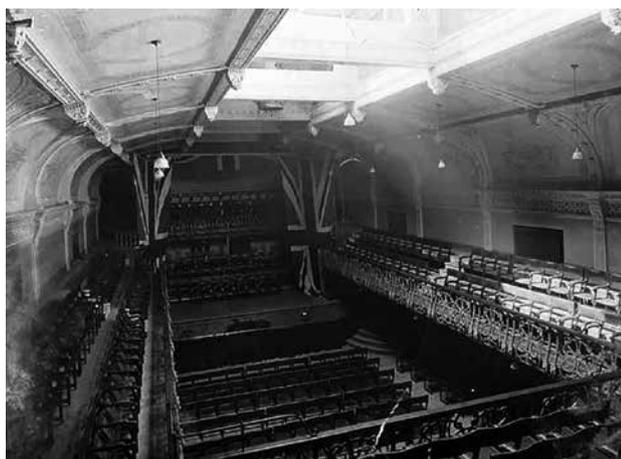
subsequent exhibition of films in Lyon in January 1896.

The bothers and their father had decided to put the exhibition of their Cinematographe and first film screenings in London under the management of their friend, Felicien Trewey. He was a juggler and shadowgraphist, had a knowledge of popular entertainment and had appeared in a number of the Lumières' first ever short films that they had shot in 1895. Trewey had also been with the Lumières in Lyon in January 1896 and was about to become Britain's first ever cinema manager.

The choice of the Regent Street venue had probably had a lot to do with its reputation as a leading national venue for the presentation of new inventions, scientific devices, theatrical and illusionist demonstrations, which it had regularly presented to the public for many previous years. This together with its reputation for technical education and its very central London location made it an ideal venue.

### Enter an early cinema technician

The press night took place in The Great Hall on the 20 February with a report that Trewey was operating the projector as well as acting as manager for the event. As is the case today – technology, illumination and other quality issues were paramount and were allegedly troubling Trewey. Hunningher's article indicates that the press were kept waiting before being admitted to the hall. The article speculates that he was likely to be making last minute attempts to maximise illumination and picture quality on the screen. The article indicates that a Polytechnic electrician, Matt Raymond, was adapting the power supply from 10 amps to 15 at the last possible opportunity, possibly even attempting 30 amps, as well as



experimenting with adjustments to the water condenser to concentrate the light from the arc lamp. Trewey praised the work of Raymond to his colleagues. The screen size of this first screening was a tiny six foot by four and half feet with a throw of sixty ft.

The very first film screenings were very short in length with verbal introductions and explanations in between the various very short films. During these verbal descriptions and introductions, Matt Raymond, who became the projectionist, was able to changeover the very short film reels. Projecting at 15 fps these fifty foot early Lumière films barely lasted thirty seconds on the screen.

Despite initial teething problems there were some very good audience responses to these early screenings. Following the press night the first commercial public showing of projected moving pictures in the UK took place the day after, on 21st February 1896. Fifty four people bought either a sixpenny or shilling ticket to see the show which exceeded the thirty two patron size audience that they had for their first ever show in Paris.

The first film shows consisted of such short subjects as "Leaving the Factory", "Arrival of a Train in a Station", "Spinning Plates", "Blacksmith at Work" and "Game of Cards". The auditorium for these early screenings was rapidly changed from The Great Hall to the smaller Marlborough Hall or room. This is likely to have been for audience size, illumination and / or electricity supply reasons.

The rapid change of venue also demonstrated just how portable the Lumières' Cinematographe equipment was and that you could use the same projection equipment for different shows in different locations at different times.

### **The Empire, Leicester Square**

This portability facilitated Trewey demonstrating the film show to the management of The Empire Theatre of Varieties in Leicester Square on 28 February. Lumière Cinematographe screenings became part of the variety show at The Empire in March 1896.

Hunningher's article details "If there was music some of the time or never is another unsolved question. The same is true of the running order of the films, which probably varied quite considerably between days and perhaps even between performances". It appears that sometimes the audience could be pleased by being provided by an encore of a particular item or even having it projected backwards. By November 1896 Empire seats were being booked by patrons ten weeks in advance – such was the success of a variety show that included moving pictures as part of it.

### **What happened next?**

Regular matinee performances of the film shows continued at The Polytechnic until July 1896 whilst Lumière screenings at The Empire Leicester Square continued for 18 months. It seems that the Lumière screenings in London became financially rewarding both for the Lumière brothers and Trewey. The Lumières took 50% of the box office gross for providing the equipment and the films. Trewey, the first ever UK cinema manager returned to France and bought a circus. The Lumière brothers continued to innovate in the field of cinema and photography and their innovations included the development of a giant curved screen system for the 1900 World's Fair and creating a photographic colour process called The Autochrome. Matt Raymond, the polytechnic's electrician, went on to

become a precursor to or an early version of a Billy Bell, Dion Hanson, Barry Wright or Steffan Laugharne - going on to specialize in cinema projection, installing projectors and organising screenings of films in a number of European countries in these early years of cinema.

By 21 March 1896 Birt Acres had installed a rival very early moving picture cinema at 2 Piccadilly Mansions, located at the junction of Shaftesbury Avenue and Piccadilly Circus called the Kineopticon. It showed a series of short silent films, but it was destroyed by fire shortly after opening. The Lumières' Cinematographe whilst grasping the importance of projection of moving pictures to multiple members of an audience, as opposed to Edison's Kinetoscope single viewer approach, used a film format with round sprocket holes which was superseded with the adoption of the film format that Edison used, and what eventually became the world wide Academy format for film.

### **The Cameo Poly cinema**

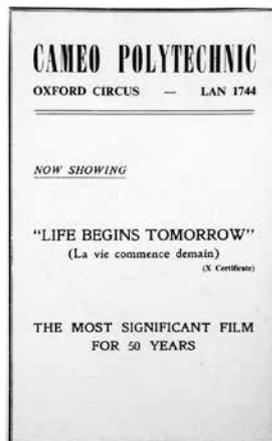
The Polytechnic Building was reconstructed in 1911 and within the new building was the Marlborough Hall regularly used for film shows with seating on one level. In 1923 it was re-fitted with 630 seats at both stalls and circle levels and re-opened as the Polytechnic Theatre. Four years later it

underwent further changes and it re-opened on 3 March 1927 with the film "Chang", now with a seating capacity of 610. In 1936 a Compton 2 manual / 6 rank theatre organ was installed. It has the organ chamber at the rear of the stage and is still in the building and playable today.

After about a year long closure, brought on by the onset of war, it re-opened in November 1940 under the new management of Clavering & Rose who added it to their small circuit of Cameo theatres. At first it was the Cameo News Theatre, then from 15 November 1947 it became the Cameo Continental Cinema, specialising in foreign films with some mainstream films too. Continuing with a specialisation in world cinema from 9 May 1952 it was re-named Cameo-Polytechnic and began to run up-market foreign films, a programming policy which continued for many years. During this period it was also referred to as the Cameo-Poly Cinema and also became the first cinema in the UK to show an "X" certificate film. It was taken over by the Classic Cinemas chain in September 1967 and re-named Classic-Poly Cinema from April 1972, but programming was becoming difficult for art house cinemas and it was closed on 10 February 1974. It was taken over by impresario Larry Parnes who re-opened it as a 'live' theatre known as the Regent Theatre, an enterprise that lasted for four years. It reverted back to being a full time cinema known as the Regent-Poly Cinema from December 1978, was re-named Classic-Poly Cinema again from 11 January 1979 and closed on 12 April 1980 when the use of the auditorium reverted back to the university.

### **Today and the future**

Today the auditorium at Re-



gent Street is used as a lecture hall, an examination hall, and as a venue for special events, lectures, conferences and cinema related events. The projection box (below right), at the rear of the circle, is stripped of all projection equipment but the university has important plans to re-develop and re-furbish the venue and reconnect it back with its importance as the very unique site that it is in the history of British cinema. "It's a simple enough idea: to restore one of the most important cinemas in Britain to its former glory, evoking a 19th. Century heritage, while looking to the future. To create a working cinema and state of the art auditorium, a place of learning, cultural exchange and exhibitions, and a landmark venue for the British film industry." – declares the promotional pamphlet for the project. " Film students will showcase their work, it will be a place to see quality world cinema and the best repertory programming, a cinema where our restored 1936 Compton Organ will once again accompany the stars of the silent screen."

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In a brief conversation I had with Fran Sponsler, the university's development officer, and Peter Hort, they gave me a more detailed idea of the plans for the mixed use vision of a landmark cinema venue and university facility. Peter informed me - "Having a current working cinema within the university environment will be a fantastic opportunity for students at both BA and MA

levels to start exploring the topics of exhibition and distribution in a way that isn't totally theoretical." He also went on to tell me - " With respect to projection - I have been talking to Skillset and they told me they are very worried at the loss of skills that has been happening with the switch from 35mm film projection to digital – and that all the skills that are associated all around the concept of presentation are being lost. They are very interested in that being a part of any programme that is being taught. Another crossover possibility for this venue, which is a possibility, and it remains to be seen how far it will go, is for it to be a focus for academic research of various sorts. There is discussion on whether or not it could be set up as a facility for a reference cinema, which would mean it would have an additional projection point for the correct screen height for that. It would be very interesting to see if there could be a 200 - 250 seat central London cinema that had, say, some 150 reference seats which could become very interesting as a catalyst for collaboration

with the industry and a whole direction of a more scientific research programme. Media Arts courses within the Communications cluster are often concerned with audience research and again the existence of a working cinema, with that commercial aspect, opens up all kinds of additional possibilities."

Having secured funding from The Heritage Lottery Fund, The Quintin Hogg Trust, and other funding sources, the redevelopment project has now approximately two thirds of the 6.1 million pound budget that it needs. The budget is not only for the build and delivery of the project, but also includes funding for a three year period of outreach, heritage and education programme associated with the new venue. It still needs to find additional funds and corporate involvement, anything from an individual's contribution and naming of an individual seat through to a major donor's or sponsor's name being involved with the venue's name. To find out more about the project, and also see how you can contribute or get involved at either an individual or corporate level - visiting the dedicated website is a good place to start:

[www.birthplaceofcinema.com](http://www.birthplaceofcinema.com)  
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References

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 All Contemporary Photographs by the Author

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