

# Have Cinema - will travel aka 'The Gypsy Chief'



*Mark Trompeteler talks with Geoff Bissex, a former quarry owner, who decided to take up his personal passion for cinema and start a mobile cinema business, Filmair, which is going from strength to strength.*

Perhaps in less enlightened and less dangerous times for children, once a year as quite a young lad I awoke at about 5 am to go and watch a spectacle of magic at nearby Clapham Common. On this yearly special occasion my mother would prepare me a pack of sandwiches, and together with a few other young street friends – we would take a very early morning short walk – and take our seats on the edge of large piece of deserted scrubland at about 6 am. Over the next six hours we would watch huge lorries arrive, gangs of men jump out of vans and lorries, and an incredible amount of well organized work take place and even real elephants appear before our very eyes! In the space of a morning that piece of scrubland had become a teeming little metropolis of colourful and spectacular entertainment – the circus had come to town!

Ever since then I have also had a fond admiration and respect towards the people who can turn up in lorries and vans and in a matter of hours convert a pubic square, an open field, a natural or man made dip in the ground into a modern cinema. One day this last summer I came across such a man made dip in the ground, “The Scoop” just by London’s Tower Bridge, and outside the Greater London Assembly building, and saw that it had been converted to a wonderfully sited open air cinema.

Geoff Bissex, the man responsible, took time out to talk to me about his mobile cinema business, Filmair.



*Mark:* Geoff, I wonder if you could tell us about your original involvement / previous experience with the film industry / film exhibition prior to Filmair?

*Geoff:* It all started in 1962 when a friend who worked part time as a projectionist at The Grand Cinema in Frome, Somerset, took me to see the box one night. I had always been intrigued about what went on behind those little windows and this was the perfect way to find out. Well it goes without saying I was hooked from that night and finished up working there part time (unpaid) for three years. It was a pair of Kalee 12s with BTH carbon arcs, so I learned the hard way, so to speak. Leading on from that I bought a pair of 16mm Bell & Howells and started doing shows around the village halls. This I did right up to the mid 1980s, when cinema took a down turn. From 1966 until 1999 my business was quarrying, during that time I owned a small limestone quarry in the Mendip Hills, Somerset.

*Mark:* What were the circumstances and developments leading up to you creating Filmair as a business / company?

*Geoff:* When I sold the quarry in 1999, having been in business all my life, there was no way I could sit still, so my two main interests were film and flying. I had gained my private pilots licence in 1975 and my commercial pilots licence in 1991. I thought I could combine the two interests. I bought a twin engined aircraft in 1999 (which I still have and fly today) and thought I could operate it professionally, and I thought I would also restart the mobile film shows, but this time with 35mm, hence the name Filmair. It took me two years experimenting and building equipment. Eventually I abandoned all “portable” projectors because I was not happy with the quality of both picture and sound and had concerns with regard reliability. I finished up with one highly modernized Kalee 21, two Cinemecanica Victoria 8s and three Victoria 4s all customized for mobile operation.

*Mark:* What are your principal areas of activity?

*Geoff:* Mainly the south of England, but I have worked East Anglia, The North including, Leeds, Nottingham, Birmingham and so on, and Glasgow and Edinburgh in Scotland. I am also doing my second year doing outdoor screening for the Isle of Man Film Commission in Douglas on the Island. Quite a lot of venues in and around London, and next year will be my fifth year doing the June Film Festival at the Scoop Amphitheatre, next to City Hall in London for More London Estates.

*Mark:* How do you market Filmair?

*Geoff:* Just on the web, word of mouth and repeat business.

*Mark:* Can you give us an idea as to the type of bookings you do – regular annual ones and occasional ones? What kind of clients do you have?

**Geoff:** Right across the board, regular ones, occasional and regular annual. Private individuals, Councils, The National Trust, English Heritage, Charitable Organizations, Festival Organisers, - this week I am off to do the Global Gathering Festival for the third year for Angel Music Group.

**Mark:** How long has Filmair been going?

**Geoff:** As I said previously, experimental work with various projectors started in 1999 and the first shows were in 2001. The 16mm shows in the early days, 1962 to 1986, were when I used my own name.

**Mark:** Is Filmair your only sole business or do you engage in other professional film activities too?

**Geoff:** No, no other activities.

**Mark:** Is the business seasonal and if so how do you cope with possible fallow periods?

**Geoff:** The thing to remember here is that it is really a hobby that has very much snow-balled and turned into a business, so any fallow periods I use for building or updating equipment.

**Mark:** Are you happy with the state of the business? What do you think the future holds for a business such as yours?

**Geoff:** Looking at the number of new enquiries I am getting, together with repeat bookings and the numerous compliments I get from satisfied customers, I think the future looks good.

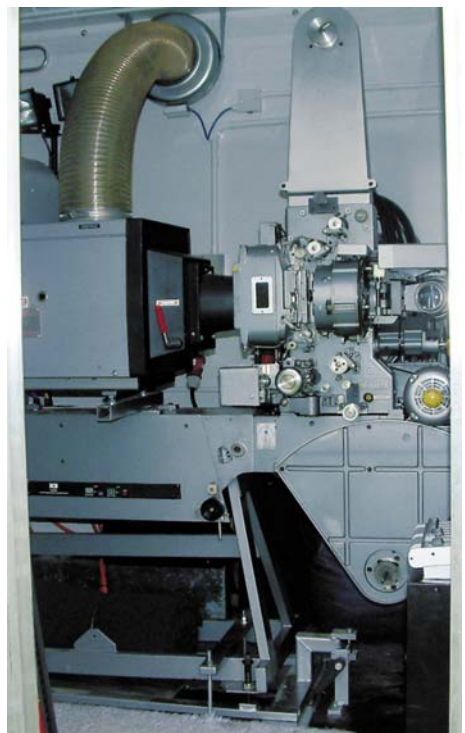


**Mark:** Why is it do you think that there has been a growing interest in special event and outdoor film screenings and how do you see this developing either positively or negatively over the next few years?

**Geoff:** I believe it is simply because it's something different and unique. The outdoor cinematic experience is still something fairly new to England.

**Mark:** How many mobile units do you have and what equipment is on board?

**Geoff:** Two purpose built trailers (mobile projection rooms). One is equipped with a Cinemeccanica Victoria 8 with a Strong Ultra 80 lamphouse with a 7 kilowatt lamp, this is used with my 60 feet wide screen either for a Drive-In where the sound is transmitted on FM for car radio reception or I have a 20,000 watt sound system for a walk-in audience of up to 4,000.



The second unit has either another Victoria 8 or a highly adapted Kalee 21 with an ISC curved gate and analog reader. The second unit uses either a 35 ft wide X 15ft scope screen or a 25ft X 19'10" Academy Screen which is electrically raised and attached to the side of a lorry, this has a 3 kilowatt Kinton lamphouse, both units have digital sound using the Dolby CP500 system.

A further three units are used for a variety of indoor events, all three are Cinemeccanica Victoria 4 machines highly customized for mobile use.

**Mark:** What vehicles do you use for each mobile unit – any special adaptations? Were the vehicles specifically built?

**Geoff:** I have one DAF 7.5 ton box van that



carries the sound systems and / or screens (this is the vehicle the two smaller screens attach to). I have one LDV box van for other uses. Two mobile projection rooms, one further box trailer, and a flat bed trailer to carry the big screen frame.

**Mark:** How do you cope with safety issues, heat and extraction, the size of towers etc in such particularly confined spaces?

**Geoff:** Health and Safety is a big issue these days, but with experience we have learned what inspectors expect of us. We always prepare risk assessment forms, equipment lists, all portable equipment is PAT tested etc. We use towers for long play, simply because we don't have the space for platters

**Mark:** How do you cope with technical equipment being driven around and being subjected to speed bumps, pot holes, steep inclines, motorway speeds etc. the mechanical stress of the roads?

**Geoff:** Everything I have, I have built myself with all this in mind.

**Mark:** What level of spares do you carry with you?

**Geoff:** We try to duplicate as much as possible, like carrying spares, back up sound systems, spare amplifiers, spare rectifiers, lamps and mirrors and so on.

**Mark:** What level of crew do you need to staff gigs?

**Geoff:** Two for most gigs, 3 or 4 for Drive-Ins

**Mark:** What is your son's involvement in the business?

**Geoff:** Nick is part time at the moment, but he enjoys the challenges of mobile cinema as much as I do, so he will take over from me at some time.

**Mark:** What are the particular challenges of sound in the open air? You cope with digital surround sound – what systems do you use - how does it perform outdoors?

**Geoff:** The first thing you realize is you need ten times the power outside. Good analogue SR or digital outside sounds fantastic, I get more compliments about my sound than anything else. I use a JBL triple bandpass bass cabinet for bass, double 15" bass and mid range cabinets with JBL high frequency horns, all driven by Crown amplifiers, I also

use JBL active crossovers. All my projectors are fitted with ICS red readers which I believe is a cut above the rest, which gives me particularly good analogue. I think most of the general public would not notice the difference between good SR and digital, other than the surround left and right separation with digital. When we have digital tracks we always run them, and with no acoustics it sounds fantastic. For audiences of up to 2000 we will set up surround sound speakers, but anything above that we don't because of delay problems.

**Mark:** What about the level of screen brightness – what kind of things do you do to cope with this?

**Geoff:** We try to go above industry standards because there are other issues outside. Unlike the cinema which is always dark, we have to cope with ambient light, and time restraints sometimes mean we have to start before it's dark enough, so we tend to use lamp power 30 or 40% above what would be used for a comparable screen size indoors.

**Mark:** How do you find digital projection compares to film projection in the open air with the kit you use?

**Geoff:** We do not at present use D cinema outdoors simply because of cost. To justify the cost of such equipment one needs to run several shows daily, 7 days a week, which in the mobile environment you cannot. We do however have digital projectors on board alongside the film projectors that are 5,000 and 10,000 lumen Christies that are used in the main for advertising and promotional work, usually prior to the start of the movie.

I have just very recently bought another digital projector - it's a 9,500 lumen "Digital Projection" Lightning with a 3 DLP HD chip set – I have barely had a chance to put it through its paces - my very first impressions are that it is a super piece of kit.

**Mark:** What do you think the impact of digital projection may have on your business?

**Geoff:** We will continue with film for large screen presentation, I don't believe it will have any real effect for 10 years or so. Digital projection does mean that more films will be available, and for that reason I will progressively update equipment.

Geoff sources his client's choice of films through a booking agent and the audiences to which he presents vary so much that this is equally reflected in the very wide variety of films he presents.

Towards the end of our conversation Geoff told me that he feels very privileged to be engaged in an occupation that he loves. For him every gig he completes is a treasured memory. For quite a few audiences who saw films beautifully projected right by the iconic landmark of London's Tower Bridge – the experience must have been memorable too.

The good news is, that next year in exactly the same spot, yet again the lorries will arrive, the men will jump out and work hard, and just like the circus of my youth, - the cinema will come to town !

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With special thanks to Geoff Bissex for his time, co-operation and the photographs.

